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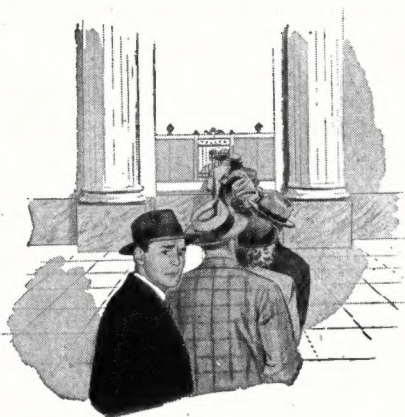
10-STORY ALL DIFFERENT! DETECTIVE[®] MAGAZINE

15¢



I LOST MY
GHOULISH FIGURE

by Joseph Commings



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BUT THIS IS EASY



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MIGHTY WONDERFUL**

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10-STORY DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

ALL STAR
ALL DIFFERENT

VOL. XVII

JUNE, 1949

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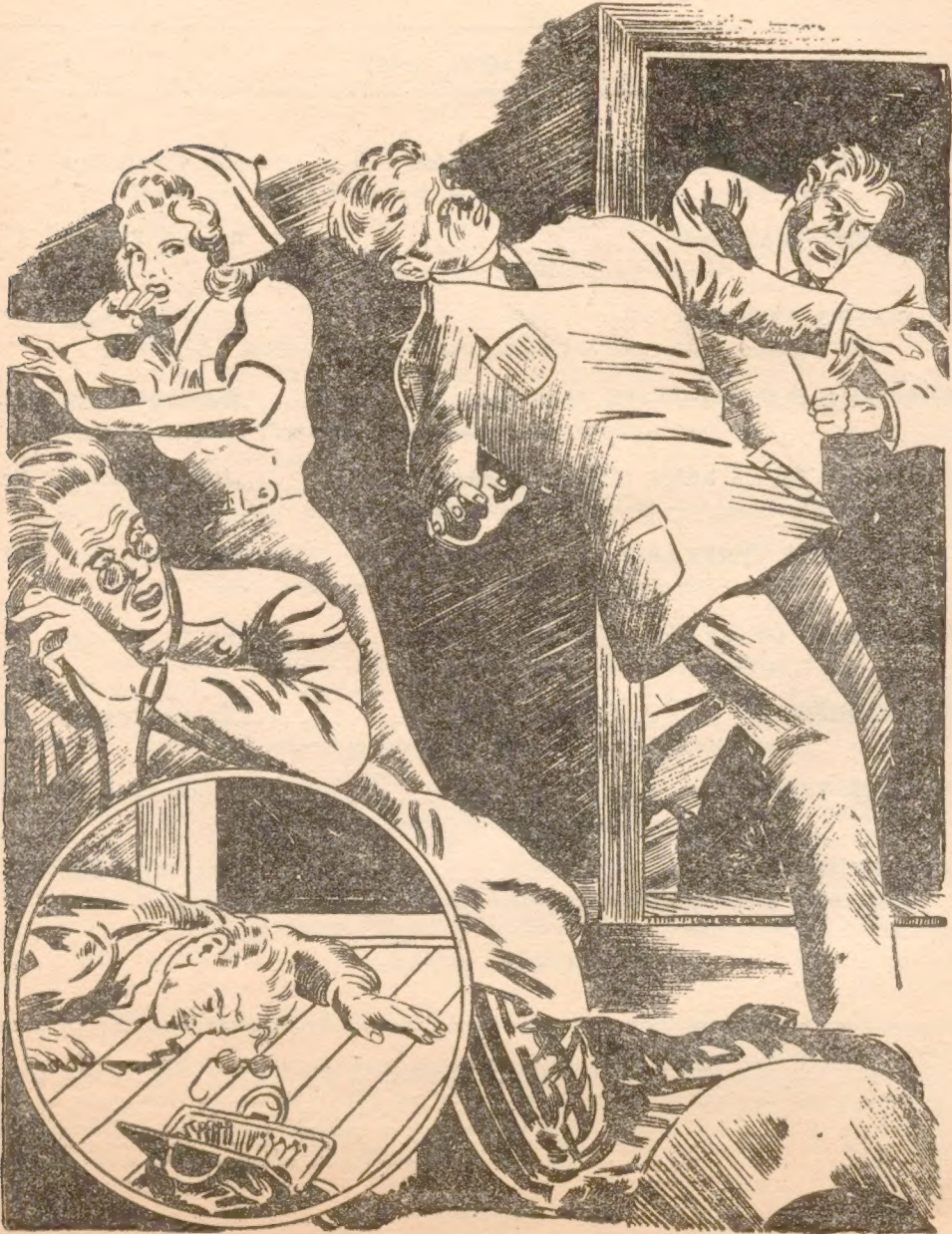
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I Lost My Ghoulish

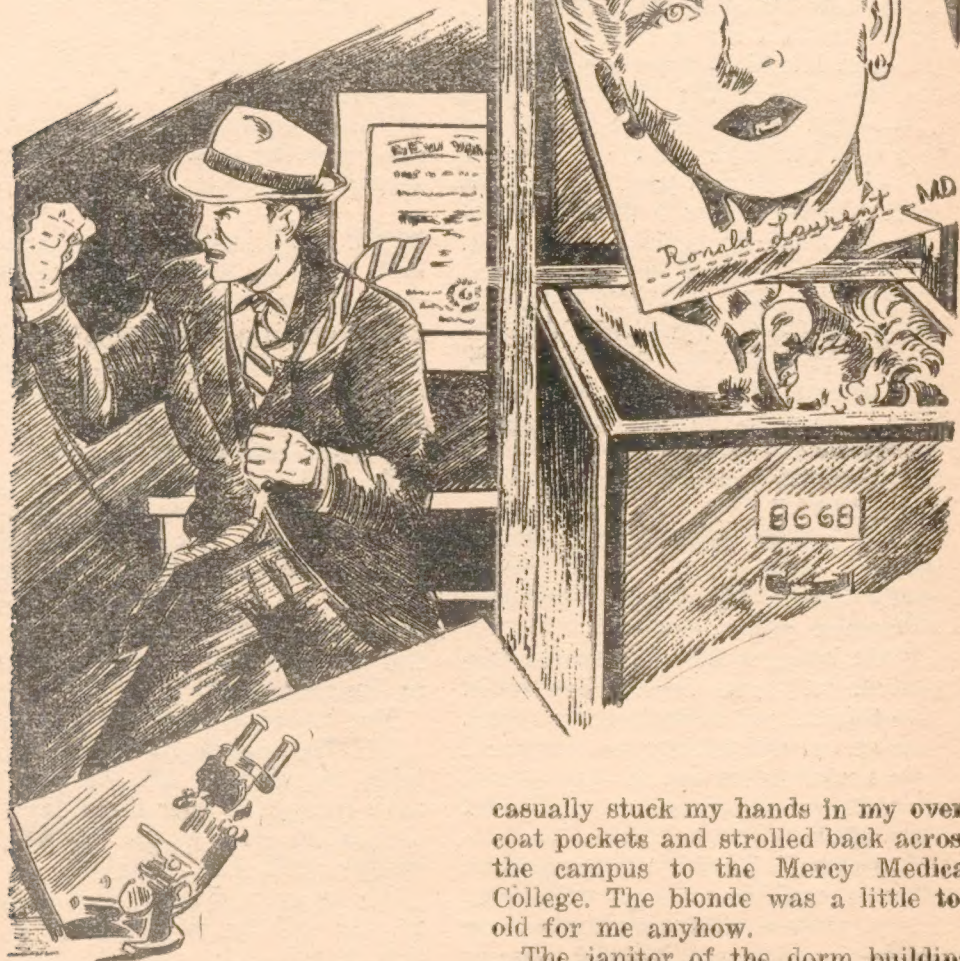
Dead bodies were nothing new to Ernie Runyan, medical student. But this time he was called for a new kind of dissection. For murder had lurked at the end of a scalpel—and the doctor, who should have planned life—was now looking in the grim face of Death.



Figure

Exciting
Mystery Novelet

By
Joseph Commings



CHAPTER I

MY BLOND date stood me up. I decided that she didn't go for medical students after all. At least, not this one. I can be worldly about things like that. When I knew she wasn't going to show up, I didn't bother to stay in the dine-a-car. I

casually stuck my hands in my overcoat pockets and strolled back across the campus to the Mercy Medical College. The blonde was a little too old for me anyhow.

The janitor of the dorm building was giving the front hall a lick and a promise with a dry mop, erasing the footprints of the day. "Hello, Ernie," he said to me. "Say, they want you over in Science."

"Who wants me?" I said, stopping and looking at him.

"Old Buttersach called and—"

"The deadhouse," I said with a groan. That's all I needed now, a

little trip through the deadhouse.

"He said it was important and to tell you when you came in."

"Let it go till tomorrow," I said.

"It's something Dean Laurent wants you to do!" That made it imperative.

"Okay." I about-faced and left the dorm.

Old Buttersach, the frog-bellied morgue-keeper, may have had a first name, but I'd never heard anybody using it. His birth records must have got lost during the Flood. I found him in his usual spot, the air around him sweet with the smell of glycerine and phenol. He was playing checkers with himself under a dim light beside the bath he bathed corpses in.

He looked up and saw me. "Ernie Runyan," he said as if calling the roll. He glanced down again at the checkerboard to puzzle out the next move, still talking. "It's not long till Christmas. I heard you're going to hang up all rubber stockings this year, Ernie, 'cause all the presents you're expecting are wet."

"Gin a body meet a body coming through with rye," I said inaccurately with a lift. I peered around. "Where're your friends?"

That brought him up, looking disgusted. "All you medics are alike. You think I got hornets in my head. You go around telling one another I take the cadavers out of storage and prop them up around a table and play gin."

"Rummy," I said. "Very rummy. There's nothing wrong with you, Butty, that a good sickey-ackey up in Neuro can't cure. What'd Laurent want me to come over about?"

"He wants you to do some dissecting."

I gulped. "Not tonight!" I had been a med student long enough to have no qualms about making parts of a cadaver at night, but I expected to have some time to myself.

"There's the order." Old Buttersach shoved a paper into my hands. It was all properly filled out and

signed by Dr. Ronald Laurent, Dean.

"When did this one come in to the table of horror?" I said.

"I was out having my supper. Locked up the place, of course. When I came back the order was outside on my desk. And the body was in the ice-box. The Dean has his own keys."

"Male or female?"

"Female," he said.

"I don't get this," I said as I followed him in. "Why'd old Dr. Compound Cathartic pick on me?"

Old Buttersach's titter sounded like a vampire's. "That's what you get for being such great shakes with a spatula."

HE WAS looking at the numbers on the box fronts. "Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. That's it." He grabbed the nickel handles on Number 17 and pulled it out like a big drawer. It came sliding out between us.

I stood rooted and I felt my eyeballs straining under the harsh lights. You acquire a certain toughness in this business, but I felt suddenly faint and I reached for something to hold on to. I was having my date with the blonde after all. This was the same woman I was to have met in the dine-a-car.

Her throat was cut from ear to ear.

Old Buttersach babbled, "I got a table all cleaned off for you. She ain't been dead over five hours." He stopped to stare at me. "What's the matter with you, Ernie?"

My eyes must have been popping. "I was talking to this woman only this noon."

I fumbled around the foot of the big drawer to get some medical papers hanging there on a clipboard. Words jumped up at me: *Unidentified—Carlisle General Hospital—Suicide.*

"Unidentified!" I snorted. "She told me her name was Peg Balriddel. She'd just blown into town. I met her at lunch and made a dinner date with her. What'd she do? Cut her throat because she couldn't face the prospect

of spending an evening with me?"

I paused and listened to Old Buttersach's wheezing breath. His eyes were topaz-yellow.

I said, "You're sure you didn't see this come in?"

"No, Ernie. I told you—"

"This is fishy," I said. It was. If I hadn't seen this woman before, I'd have gone ahead with my job and forgot all about it. By the merest chance, I had a name for her. Sheer luck. This was all too hurried, too shady.

I had an uneasy feeling that the person who had signed that order didn't want the woman identified.

"Where's that order with Dean Laurent's name on it?" I said.

"You left it on my desk." Old Buttersach's voice sounded faded.

"I'm not going to touch this till I phone the hospital."

My heels cracked on the scrubbed stone floor as I went back out to the desk. The order was lying there. I folded it and shoved it in my pocket.

I picked up the phone and called the Carlisle General Hospital, in town. I said, "Hello? Admittance desk? This is Ernie Runyan."

"Yes," said a discontented female voice. "I know it's you. I recognized your bell-like tones."

"How's Gwen?" I said.

"How's yourself, crocus? I thought you were going to call me last night."

"Very busy searching for cranial nerves," I said. "Look, sugar puss. Give me an assist. I—"

"You weren't kidding me about that movie and a supper, were you, Ernie?"

"No, no. Sure, I'll take you. Now, about that unidentified woman you shipped over to us tonight. She's—"

"We ain't shipped anything to that bone-hall tonight," said Gwen.

"The suicide," I insisted, getting warm around the edges. "The one that cut her throat."

"Never came in here," said Gwen positively. "I ought to know, oughtn't I? We ain't sent you anything in days. How can people be so disgusting-

ly healthy? Or wouldn't you know?"

"If that's a rhetorical question," I said, "I'll let you mull on it while I hang up."

I let the phone thump down on the desk. Old Buttersach's gray face came bobbing up to me. "What's the matter, Ernie?"

"The hospital says they didn't ship any body to us tonight. How'd Laurent get hold of it?"

"Somebody's made a mistake somewhere," said Old Buttersach. He was trying to be philosophical. He wouldn't let himself get too excited. He knew he had a purr in his mitral valve that wasn't helped by excitement. "Some papers got mixed up, I betcha. It never happened like this before, but I remember a time when . . ."

He started telling me some antiquated story, but I wasn't listening. I was thinking about how I'd met the blonde who called herself Peg Balriddel. The first time I'd ever seen her was at noontime in the lunchroom just off the campus. A lot of students ate there and it's a great place for picking up stray femmes.

I started a casual conversation with Peg, who was sitting at the same table, and told her that the lunch was on me. She was rather good-looking, with a pleasant quirk to her lips when she spoke, but in repose her mouth showed traces of disappointment.

She said, "No, I haven't got a date tonight, honey. Nobody wants you when you're old and gray." She drew a sigh that was full of self-sympathy.

I said, "You're not old and you're not gray. You're blond—and just what the doctor ordered for pleasant companionship."

Her mouth turned up a little, pleasant and warm, but her eyes remained cool and appraising. "It's nice to listen to, anyhow," she said.

"What're you doing in a burg like this?" I asked.

"I dropped in to see a couple of guys."

"You're not going to be lonely after all," I said, a little cynically.

"Oh, it's just business with them, honey. I'll get that over with this afternoon, then I'll see you tonight. They're connected with the medical school, too. Maybe you can tell me where I can find them."

Then she told me that she was looking for Dr. Ronald Laurent and Dr. Oliver Riis. I'd been mighty curious to know what her business with those two was. Laurent was, of course, the dean. And Riis was the medical school's superintendent.

Now Peg Balriddel was lying in there dead. Things like this, so sudden and horrible, are hard to believe. I stood there like one in a trance.

OLD BUTTERSACH'S mumbling voice was breaking into my thoughts again. He was saying, "Are you going to call the dean?"

"This is too involved for phone talk," I said. "I'm going to see him. First, I want to check with the super."

I picked up the handset again and dialed. Riis usually ran the late shift in the clinic in town three nights a week. And this was one of the nights. He'd be there from nine till eleven. But the yellow-faced clock on the wall told me that it was only 8:35. I was ringing Oliver Riis's home, figuring to catch him before he left for the clinic.

I heard his silky voice on the wire. I told him who I was and I knew he remembered me—chiefly as a practical joker. I was sure he suspected me of putting the rubber-boned skeleton with cherries for eyeballs in his bed last Hallowe'en.

I said, "A body came in tonight marked unidentified. I can identify her and I'm pretty sure you can, doctor. The name's Peg Balriddel."

"I don't know anybody by that name," he said shortly.

"She said she was going to see you this afternoon."

"I had no callers this afternoon, Runyan."

"Yes, but, doctor. She's a little over thirty, blond—"

"I'm sorry," chopped in Riis. He let his receiver drop with a decisive click.

I swore at the phone. I had a good mind to call him back and tell him what I thought of his arrogant manner. Antagonism against our superiors simmers in most of us, and mine was ready to boil over.

No, I wouldn't call back. To hell with Superintendent Riis. Dean Laurent was my man. He was just as crusty. But I'd see him in the flesh.

As I turned away from the desk to go, a cold wave rippled over me. It wasn't that Old Buttersach had left one of the refrigerators open. It was the way I felt inside that had started a rash of goose pimples between my shoulder blades. Peg was dead and I'd never known death quite this way before. Working on stiffes hadn't meant anything more to me than a sculptor carving stone. But Peg had been a living, breathing woman only a few hours ago. A bitter woman, perhaps, but not ready to take her own life.

I stood there, letting the frosting thicken on me, telling myself that someone had murdered her. That someone had tried to use me to dispose of her body.

Laurent would put me straight. Maybe this was a new plan for inconvenient corpses. I said to myself, "Jest if you must, kid, but suppose this woman was killed because she had some vital information. Anything is possible in these atomic days. The murderer might have seen me with her in the lunchroom. If he thinks I know the secret, he may try to knock me off next."

Old Buttersach's voice, echoing off the bare surfaces of walls, made me jump. "Are you going to see Dr. Laurent about it now, Ernie?"

I could drop the whole thing—or make some sort of gesture to sponge the ignominy of a violent death from that clay inside.

I felt as if I were about to dive off a high rock into unknown, murky water. "Yeah, Butty. I'll see you later."

CHAPTER II

A BUS took me to the charming residential section of town. Dean Laurent had lots of money. Besides running the medical school, he was the recommended physician for the upper social stratum.

Crisp dead leaves swirled around my feet as I ran up the steps to the house front and punched the doorbell. The door was opened by a puffed-up butler. When he looked at me his eyebrows raised a quarter of an inch and his nose followed them up. "Yes?"

"I'm Ernie Runyan. A medix student. I want to see Dr. Laurent."

The butler didn't stir. "Mrs. Laurent is entertaining. So if you'll please—"

I'd been getting rebuffs all night. Irritated, I reached out to push him. "One side," I said.

His eyebrows shot up another three-quarters inch and he jigged out of my way.

I barged in.

The big room had all the lights going. A cabinet television-radio-phonograph was playing a Benny Goodman record. Some matrons who should have known better were wagging their bustles with some old fogies who were thinking of the younger gals they might be with tonight.

This hopped me up some more. They were throwing a big gay party while I was playing squire to a dead date.

The first person who made any impression on me as I entered was the woman who was standing with the man in front of the cabinet, beating time with her hands to the disked

clarinet. She was tall and silver-haired and as handsome as sin. And she was soused to her jewel-embellished ears.

She wore a gold lamé sheath that followed her svelte lines all the way from her floating strapless top to the floor. She looked like bullion with sex appeal. She swayed and threw her arm with abandon around the man's shoulders and I could see her powdered shawl muscles dimple.

She cried out with ecstasy, "Come on, Benny! Melt that wax!"

I walked up to her. "Mrs. Laurent, you've met me at a couple of formal do's. Ernie Runyan."

She lurched around to face me fully and tried to focus the turquoise eyes that matched the turquoise earrings. "Oh yes. Ernie Runyan. You'll have a drink? Try one of my boiler-makers."

"First, I'd like to know if your husband is here?"

"No," she said.

"Do you know where he is?"

"No."

I was irritated. It seemed as if I wasn't getting anywhere at all. "Do you care?"

Mrs. Irene Laurent just rocked on her heels. She was evidently deliberating just how she should take me.

The man with her answered. "No, she do not care."

I looked at him. He was sleek, slight, and olive-skinned, with preened sideburns. He had a crimson sash diagonally across his pure white shirt front.

I said, "Who's this?"

"Count Vasiliko," she said.

We'd all heard about Mrs. Laurent's latest acquisition, the phony count. I took an immediate dislike to him.

A hiccup popped out of Irene Laurent, much to her surprise. I'd never seen her as souped-up as this. "He's my guest of honor. He's been paying constant court to me ever since he arrived ten days ago."

I KNEW why I didn't like him. I was jealous of him for being able to hang around Irene Laurent for over a week. She was older than I, but everything a women needs she had; she was very a beautiful dish. Not that it helped me to know her any better. I was surprised that she even knew who I was.

I said to her, "You might be able to answer some of the things I was going to ask your husband."

"I'll talk to you, Ernie," she said then. "In private?"

The count rapped his heels together. "You have my permission?" he said in a pipsqueak voice.

I spun crossly on him. "Permission for what?"

"To leave me to talk to you," he said archly.

"Who are you?" I said. "The Bulgarian vulgarian?"

This fop was getting my dander up. I had a man's work to think of, seeing Laurent about a dead woman. I was in no mood to monkey with Count Vasiliko's petty peeves or a finicky sense of honor.

Irene Laurent looked at me, one eyelid drooping. "You can't talk to him like that. He's in my house. He's my guest. I couldn't get rid of him tonight if I wanted to."

Was she winking at me? Did she want to razz the count? I'd heard she was as changeable as the weather, blowing hot and cold. If I had time, later on, I'd find out more about that temperament.

I said, "Have you tried getting rid of him lately?"

"No," she said with a sigh.

The count stood stiffly. "Why should she? I am her guest of honor. I am paying her court for ten days. I bring culture."

"The only kind of culture you bring to this shindy," I said, encouraged by the pleased look on Irene Laurent's face, "is a microscope slide of a smear of *bacillus vulgaricus*."

"You can't talk to me like that! I

won't permit it!" squeaked the count.

This idle chatter was getting the best of my temper. "I can talk any way I like. I'm not a guest."

"How fortunate for you," said Irene Laurent indignantly. Her indignation seemed as false on her as a red beard. "If you're not a guest, why don't *you* throw him out?"

It made sense to me, the way I was feeling. I was rapidly reaching the explosive stage and all I needed was someone to egg me on, like Irene Laurent was doing. And my own troubled mind demanded some kind of relief. I wanted to kick him the way I'd kick a chair I'd tripped over.

I grabbed the count by the scruff of the neck as he started to dodge away. I said, "You're going to ski-jump the stoop!"

"Let me go of the collar!" cried the count thinly. "You can't put me out! I no have finished listening to Benjamin Goodman!"

I pushed the count along the hall while the other guests gasped. I pitched him down the steps and slung his top hat, stick, and overcoat after him. I stood on the top step, dusting my hands and feeling like the king of the hill.

"Go peddle your hair oil someplace else," I told him.

The count sprawled on the cold sidewalk, burning like a Bunsen and threatening me with the U.N.

Someone put an arm on my shoulder. It felt like an affectionate arm. I twisted my head. Irene Laurent was leaning against me. An amused smile, like that of a Roman empress at the Circus Maximus, bewitched her face.

"I'm glad you did that—Ernie," she said. "That man was beginning to nauseate me." She backed up and pulled me in after her. "Close the door, dear boy."

Then, in my mind, I saw Peg Balmiddel's dead face on the slab. "I've got to see your husband. It's urgent. I mean business."

"I mean business too," she said

suggestively. "I mean, I may be able to tell you what you want to know, Ernie."

WE WENT into a sitting room off the hall. We were the only ones in there. It was all modernistic. I sat back in a love seat and smelled the good time that the other people were having—cigarette smoke, perfume, liquor, excellent food.

Irene Laurent came over and sat on the other half of the seat. She crossed her legs. The evening gown was slit to the knees in front and I could see her cobwebby hose and high heels. The furniture in the room was interesting to look at, but not half as potent as were her silken calves.

"This is the way to live," I said, trying to relax.

She kept her turquoise eyes on my face. "It is wonderful."

"At some other time when I'm not pressed," I said, "I'd like to have to hack my way out of here with a wheatstraw. At heart, I'm a sybarite."

"Really? Looking at you, I wouldn't think so. You're rugged. Rugged in a handsome way."

"Why don't you say I'm pleasingly ugly and be done with it?" I was ruefully grinning. I was also wondering what she thought she could tell me.

"If I want you to be handsome, you'll be handsome—handsome."

I thought for a moment about the Dean. There wasn't anything handsome about him. "Do you get your way every time?"

"I usually do." Her mind seemed to shift, the way a backfield does before the next play. "I was meant for this sort of life. I don't even want to know what's happening to other people who haven't the things I have. I can't stand squalor, disease, death. Both my husband and the butler go through my newspapers before I get them and cull all the disagreeable items with a scissors. Do you think I'm a coward?"

I said, "I think you're like one of those princesses who lived in an ivory tower." I was fascinated by her wide, bare shoulders.

"You're awfully sweet." She was holding my hand now. "I do work hard in my ivory tower. Do you realize that I've been in this evening dress half the day making little preparations for my party?" A thought seemed to seep in through the alcohol in her brain. "But, oh, what're we talking about? You wanted to ask my husband something. And he isn't here . . ."

"Something odd happened at the school tonight. I'm trying to certify the identity of a woman's body."

"Oh, how awful!"

"I think her name's Peg Balriddel."

"Oh?" she said. A flicker somewhere behind her eyes puzzled me.

"She may have seen your husband this afternoon."

Irene blinked fuzzily. "I don't understand. When did she die?"

"Sometime late this afternoon. Was your husband around at that time?"

"He was here part of the afternoon."

"Did you see a blonde call on him?"

"No, but that wouldn't be too unusual if I were elsewhere in the house. She may not have even come here. She could have gone to his private office. Or the school."

"Your husband would know, of course. Where's he now?"

"He never tells me where he's going, Ernie."

I said, "There's a chance that Dr. Riis might know about Peg. I'll have to try him again."

"How did this woman die?"

"Her throat was cut."

Irene closed her eyes and clapped her hands over her ears. "No details. Please." She opened her eyes and let her hands drop again. "How did that happen?"

"I don't know. The label on her says suicide." In my own mind, I didn't think so. The woman I'd made a date with this noontime wasn't go-

ing to take her life a few hours later. It had to be murder. I stood up.

"You're not going!"

"I'll have to go to the clinic to see Dr. Riis. A thing like this can't wait very long. When your husband comes in, have him get in touch with the deadhouse."

She tried to struggle up, but flopped back again. "Wait, Ernie. There's something I must tell you. It's dreadful. But I need help so badly."

I turned and looked at her beseeching face. "What is it?" I wasn't very curious. I figured it was some woman's wife to keep me there. *Tell me and let me go!* I thought.

SHE put her fingertips up to what must have been her throbbing temples. "No, I can't. It's too awful." She looked up like Joan of Arc at the stake. "I'll blunder through my own way, Ernie."

I came back toward her. "You'll blunder all right," I said. "I don't like having this end like a cliff-hanger. You want to tell me. You're going to eventually. So tell me."

I wondered if this might not bring us closer together. I couldn't forget Peg, cold and dead, but it was Irene who was warm and vibrant. Her wedding ring kept my wolfish instincts at bay.

"It's—it's something that's troubling my husband, Ernie," she said haltingly.

I was glad to hear that her husband had troubles. The more troubles he borrowed, the more of a lender I'd like to be.

"Does that worry you so much?" I said.

She looked at me with liquid eyes and I melted a little. "Yes. I can't bear to see him *too* unhappy. Better sit down, Ernie. It concerns a paper—"

I sat down again. "I'm listening," I said impatiently.

"A paper that Dr. Riis is holding. My husband wants to get it back."

"Dr. Riis?" I said. These big pill pushers weren't infallible after all. "What kind of a paper is it?"

"It's a—a prescription. An old one that my husband signed twelve years ago. Dr. Riis is holding it over my husband's head. It's becoming unbearable. We've got to get it back and destroy it."

"Why is an old prescription so important?" I asked, interested in spite of my own problems.

"I can't tell, Ernie. My husband and I never had any secrets from each other. But he's brooding over this. I know. It's coming between us more than you know."

"Isn't that good?" I said sardonically.

"Ernie, you've got to help me get it back. You're going to see Dr. Riis. He may carry the prescription on his person."

"What name is on it besides your husband's? Who was the patient?"

She lowered her eyes and hesitated.

I said, "I'll have to know if I ever expect to find it." I thought, *I'll do this for her the first chance I get.*

She said finally, with what seemed like her last breath, "Balriddel."

"Balriddel!" I repeated with a start. I got those clammy thoughts of a corpse again. They repelled me and they lured me on. "Then you know about the woman I was asking about!"

"No, I don't. All I know is the name. You touched this off when you mentioned it yourself. The prescription is the important thing, Ernie."

"I'll say it is," I said. Balriddel, Laurent, and Riis were making connections again, this time on paper. I was all eager to see Riis.

She had latched onto my hand. "Think of some way to get it from him."

"And if he hasn't got it on him?" I knew she was using me; but her warm, soft shoulders, the perfume, the nearness of her were making putty out of me.

"It may be in the clinic office. Get

him away from there so that I can come in after you both leave and search for it."

"And if it isn't there either?"

"Then it will be that much harder for us."

For sport, I asked, "Suppose I get the prescription. How do you know I won't be trouble to your husband then?"

Her turquoise eyes were only inches away, the lids dropping on them temptingly. "I'm sure that other things are a greater temptation to you—darling."

And then she kissed me to prove her point.

How right she was!

CHAPTER III

KNOWING what I did about Riis I felt that I could beard him in his den. Riis had hung up on me when I'd mentioned Peg Balriddel. He'd said he'd never heard of her. That was suspicious. Riis and Laurent were both involved with the dead woman. Maybe they'd plotted killing her together and had made me the whipping boy. They weren't going to get away with it.

That paper of Laurent's that I was going after could be a two-edged sword. I could use it too. Irene was arming me with the very weapon she was sending me after. Let Riis and Laurent try to expel me after this—if they dared. I was as immune to their poison as if I were pumped full of antitoxin.

My mind was full of mad schemes.

It was nearly 9:30 when I got to the clinic. I attended to my appearance before entering. When I came into the waiting room my hair was standing on end like wire, my necktie was hanging outside my overcoat, and I was sucking noisily on a soggy cigarette that needed relighting. I looked wildly at the three women patients huddled on the bench.

An Amazon of a nurse stepped forward on large, flat-heeled shoes.

"Aren't you one of the students? What's the matter?" She had a donkey-bray voice.

I swerved my crazy eyes from the women to the nurse. "You're a nurse," I began monotonously. "I want to talk to you. You'll let me talk to you, nurse, won't you?"

The nurse's mouth fell open and she stepped back. There were little squeaks of terror from the huddled women. The nurse tried to reassure them with a false smile.

"No nonsense!" she lashed at me. But I could see that she was unsure herself.

"You're a nurse," I said. "You look like a nice nurse. You can help me. I've got to see Epsom Salts. I want him to stop that ticking inside my head."

"You don't mean Dr. Riis?" she faltered.

"I mean Dr. Riis. No, no. Don't be afraid of me. None of you. I'm not psycho. I'm perfectly sane. It's just that those little wheels are going around inside my head. It's like a phonograph. Yes, yes. That's what it's like. A phonograph. Playing, playing that horrible little funeral march over and over again. And," I added, like a bright boy, "I eat things. Broken glass. Matches. Buttons. Corks. Horsehair."

The nurse stumbled backwards to the door that led to Riis's consulting office. "H-have a seat, please, please. I'll see if the doctor can see you. Oh, I'm sure he can. Just a second." She shot inside and the door banged after her.

I sat down on the same bench with the three ladies. They gave me plenty of room. Other students had cracked under the strain of too much skull-practice and an overloading of benzedrine inhalers. I eyed them moronically.

"You'd better not stay," I said to them in a drone. "There may be some bloodshed."

The three women looked fearfully at one another. Then they all got to

their feet with forced slowness. Reaching the safety of the door, they all made a spurt. I had the waiting room to myself. I gave my upstanding hair a fresh rumple.

Inside the doctor's office I could hear the nurse braying, "A maniac's out there looking for you! He may have a razor or a gun!"

I kept watching the door through which she had disappeared. It was yanked open and a face with a sway-backed nose appeared. It was Riis's. His skin turned the color of an aged billiard ball before he darted back in again and slammed the door.

I could hear him bark to the nurse, "Quick! Out that other door! Get Dworshag and Hoffman! I'll try to stall him! Hurry, for heaven's sake! He may try to take my life!"

I heard the nurse's heels gallop out the back door. I knew I wouldn't have much time for anything.

I bounced at the closed door and rushed it open.

Riis peeked at me. "Yes, sir? What can I do for you? Aren't you—"

I crowded his boat-bellied, sabreshinned body back across the office. Riis retreated until the desk stopped him. He upset a box of tongue depressors. They all spilled out and clattered woodenly on the floor.

I HAD to rough him up to get what I was looking for. There was no other way. If any of my woolly theories about Riis's guilt backfired on me, I'd wind up in the snake pit.

"What happened to her?" I demanded deliriously. "What happened to her?"

"Who?" said Riis through dry lips. He had eyes like a hunted mongoose.

"My wife. My beautiful wife. She was so smooth, so soft. It didn't matter to me that she was as frilly as a French chop. I wanted a little family. A *bambino*. My *bambino*." The sob that tore out of my throat was almost real. "Now it's all gone! It's all on a cold slab in the morgue!" I

felt I was really putting over the act.

Riis croaked, "That was your wife? No, that's impossible!"

I hurled myself at his throat. "You dirty buzzard! I'm going to bash the bejudas out of you!"

The instant he felt my hands on him he screeched bloody murder. He scrambled for the phone. I beat it out of his reach. His defenses were down. He was wide open. This was dreams come true. With all the black bile that seethed in me, I lifted my Sunday punch from my knees and rawskinned my knuckles on his jaw. He caved in as if I'd carried a dose of ether in my fist.

I stooped over him, went feverishly through his pockets and grubbed out his wallet. As I opened it, I heard feet running rapidly toward the office. It was the nurse racing back with the two bruisers she'd been sent for.

My fingers were all thumbs. Papers wouldn't become unstuck in the wallet. I saw what looked like a soiled, age-creased prescription blank and tugged it out. I had merely time to glance at the signature and see Dr. Laurent's name, before the feet thundered up to the door. I crammed the ragged prescription into my pocket and tossed the wallet on the floor beside the groaning Riis.

The door crashed open and Dworshag and Hoffman hurtled in. Each was a broth of a boy. They were both dressed like interns, wearing little white jackets that bound them around their beefy middles. The men in the white coats were coming for me at last.

Riis, on the floor, was coming to, gasping for air. "He was trying to kill me over some woman!" he shouted at the two men.

I was facing the two, my fists swinging. These guys were just attendants, hired to muscle around stretchers, heavy equipment, and loonies. They had no love for students.

"All right!" I hollered bravely. This was my night to howl. "Come on! I'll wreck the joint!"

I had taken my eyes off Riis. He sneak-attacked me from the side. I reeled against the wall, short-winded.

He gloated at me with a mouth full of gleaming crowns. "I used to be pretty good," he boasted.

I rolled out of the way of the avalanche of Dworshag and Hoffman. "You yellow-bellied quack of all trades," I rasped. "I'm still good!"

I felt his white face mash under a hard left. He tumbled into a corner.

"Stop him!" Riis whinnied. "Don't let him hit me again!"

One of the tough boys grunted, "We'll stop him—if he'll only hold still!"

I picked up a heavy chair and waved it at them to check their charge. They pulled a nutcracker movement on me. I heaved the chair through the closed glass window. The chair stuck halfway through the destroyed frame while glass rained outside. There were cries from the street. A police whistle.

They all closed in on me. With a hellish scream, I kicked and butted. I had the great satisfaction of seeing Dworshag go spread-eagled across the desk in a flying mare before I was hammered to the floor.

People were pouring in through the front door. I caught a glimpse of the nurse's uniform. "More reinforcements, eh?" I bellowed, my lungs wheezing. Then I saw a glint of brass buttons and a stick in a blue-sleeved arm. I relaxed under the pile of bodies, legs, and arms.

The nurse yelled, "That's him! He's gone nuts!"

A dozen hands grabbed me and hoisted me to my feet. Everyone looked the worse for wear. Riis climbed up stiff-jointed, feeling his neck to see if it were dislocated. I looked at Dworshag and Hoffman. I had happily left my mark on all of them. But I had suffered too. Whatever project I had now would have

to wait till I could get clear of this new mess.

Two policemen had come in. They rounded up the battlers. A crowd of honest citizens was rubbering in at the door.

One of the policemen said, "You're all under arrest for disorderly conduct." He jabbed his finger at me. "Do you want him held for observation, doctor?"

Riis gave me an underhanded look. I knew he would like to fry my liver over hell-fire. He had his chance to have me thrown into the hatch—if he himself were clean.

He said, "No, nothing that serious. We had an altercation."

So he didn't want me blowing off about the dead woman to the cops! He was playing it close to his chest so that he could deal with me by himself—later.

I was finally getting my breath. I found that I still had enough face to grin with. "Thanks for getting here in time, boys," I said to the cops. "Swell fight while it lasted. Be right home, mom."

"The whole lot of you are going to see a magistrate," said the policeman impartially.

Riis shouted at the cops, "Keep your filthy hands off me! I'm a respectable physician! I won't stand for being herded along with that scum!"

I growled at him. "Do you want me to hit you again?"

"Pay them no mind, Pat," said one cop to the other as they rushed us all out. "The whole place is a squirrel-cage."

CHAPTER IV

WE WERE dealt with summarily in night court. The magistrate fined us ten dollars apiece or ten days for disturbing the peace. Riis paid his right out of a green-stuffed billfold. I wasn't that well heeled at the moment.

While I was still in the dock, wor-

iving what a jail sentence might mean to a rising young medico's record, the magistrate's phone rang. He listened attentively, then hung up. He said, "A very influential resident of this community, whose word is as good as a bond, just let me know that she'll"—he hastily revised his pronoun—"they'll submit bail for Ernie Runyan. You're all dismissed."

Irene was keeping track of things.

Riis blustered. "Are you going to let *him* go? He damaged my office!"

"Sue him!" said the magistrate tersely.

As soon as I got out of court, I beat it. Under a lamp post I examined the prescription. Riis hadn't even missed it. The vital part read:

Rx Morph Sulf gr vi

I could see where Laurent, in filling out an innocent dose, had made a drunken error. The patient should have got six grains of magnesium (Mag)—instead he got the same size dose of *morphine*. A killer-diller.

And the patient's name was Frank Balriddel!

I felt a pang of pity toward the Balriddels. They had not been long for this world.

Who was Frank? Peg's husband? How close had Peg been to Riis up until this afternoon? This was a bombshell that could explode in any direction.

Because it all added up to blackmail.

My mind worked busily. It was gossiped around the school that years ago Laurent drank heavily on occasion. But he was a teetotaler now. I'd never heard that his drinking had endangered his work. This one time, when he wrote out Balriddel's prescription, it had.

Balriddel must have been one of Laurent's patients about twelve years ago when the Dean was just a practicing physician in town and before he took over the medical school. In writing the prescription, Laurent made a mistake in one small word. Ignorant that it was a deadly dose,

the patient brought the prescription to the druggist to be filled. Dr. Riis was only a doctor of pharmacy then. He was the druggist.

Riis might have called Laurent to verify that wrong-looking dose, then discovered that Laurent was still drunk. If I knew Laurent, he must have angrily ordered Riis to do as he was ordered. Riis filled the prescription and Frank Balriddel died. Riis never opened his mouth. He had the prescription and he kept it all hush-hush. He knew that Laurent was guilty of manslaughter in the second degree. For that, Laurent could be sentenced for fifteen years.

No wonder Laurent was worried about the prescription in Riis's hands!

I shoved the prescription back into my pocket. That's where it was going to stay. In there, it would keep me as safe as a bird sanctuary. Or would it?

I glanced up and down the lonely tree-lined street. I couldn't see a soul. But still I had a queasy feeling of eyes watching me.

I scurried back to the campus and the Science Building. I went down to Old Buttersach's whitewashed, preservative-reeking dungeon to ask him if there was any news on the corpse with the slit throat.

He said that absolutely nothing had happened.

"You should have been with me, Butty," I said.

He looked curiously at my face, but he didn't ask any silly questions.

I WENT up in the front hall and ran into a long, skinny student named Decatur. He was carrying a copy of Gray's *Anatomy* under his arm and right away he started giving me his reason for being there, the way people do when they step outside their well-known habits.

"I've got a written examination on the human skeleton coming up soon, so I dropped in to Anat to bone up." He grinned at me, but I didn't grin back. "Been in a fight, Ernie?"

"How can you tell?"

"You got the makings of a mouse under your right eye."

"Ecchymosis, as Dean Laurent says."

Decatur looked serious. He was essentially a serious boy. "What kind of an operation did they have upstairs today?"

"You mean in the theatre? No ops all day. Why do you ask?" I was beginning to get a queer, creepy feeling.

"Sure there was."

"You're imagining things, Decatur. If there'd been an op I'd've been in on it. I'm hogging surgery. I check all notices thoroughly. I ought to know."

"Listen, my skeptical friend," said Decatur, getting slightly annoyed. "Don't tell me about it if you don't want to. I was only asking. I can read the reports later. But I'll tell you how I know there *was* an op in the theatre. I've got a habit. I always cough and hawk into the laundry chutes."

"I've seen you do it, Decatur. Skip the revolting details."

Decatur kept right on with the details. "And everybody knows I've got a false set of choppers. Uppers. Pyorrhea when I was ten years old. Lost most of my second teeth to a jaw-smith. The dental plumber extracted everything but my wolf-fangs. Well, these china choppers have been slipping lately and I should have been more cautious. But less than an hour ago I was passing one of the chutes upstairs and coughed as expected. I fired my falsies right out of my kisser and down the shaft. Toothless, I ran down to the basement to hunt through the dirty laundry for them. And that's when I saw—"

"Did you find your teeth?"

"Of course I did. Ain't I grinning at you with them? I saw the operating gown with blood on it. Since the fresh gowns are in sterile packages in the operating theatre, there must have been a blood-letting up there to account for the stains on this one."

I felt my flesh start to crawl. I wanted to get away from Decatur.

"All right, Sherlock Holmes," I said to him, "you can go back to Baker Street."

He kidded around for another minute, then waved good night and went out through the big doors. I bolted down the steps to the basement where the laundry was.

The laundry sorter had made piles of most of it. The laundry went out at seven o'clock every morning, so this was linen that had been used only during the last day. I didn't have much trouble finding the operating gown. There was only one. It had large brown splotches on both sleeves. No bloodstains anywhere else.

I twisted it in my hands, looking at the reverse side of it. All I could see were some pale peach-colored streaks around the neck and shoulders.

I bundled it up and stuck it under my arm. "If the blood on these sleeves matches Peg Balriddel's serologic reactions, then I'll know that the killer wore this while standing behind Peg, slicing her windpipe. And it must have happened in the operating theatre . . ."

I was coming up out of the basement when I heard somebody walking quickly in the main hall. I looked out around the metal door and saw Dean Laurent striding in my direction. I couldn't come out without his seeing me. I ducked back and glanced hastily around, seeking a place to stow away the bloodstained bundle that was under my arm. I stuffed it in behind the fire-hose rack. Then I stepped out to meet Laurent. Coming face to face with him made my nerves feel like tangled wire.

HE WAS small, with bull's-eye bifocals and a clipped mustache. He carried his medical case. He wore a bell-crowned derby and a shoddy overcoat with a molting rabbit collar. This was the seductive Irene's mate. To me, he look an offensive little devil.

I said to him, "Dr. Laurent, I've

Then trying to get in touch with you."

"I know," he said in a gritty voice. "I heard about it. We'll wait. I'm expecting Superintendent Riis."

We both went into Dean Laurent's gloomy office. There was a black walnut bookcase, a Victorian mahogany carved desk, and on the walls sober pictures of Agassiz, Van Leeuwenhoek, and Darwin in the throes of their discoveries. Laurent shed his coat the way a snake sheds its skin. He hung it up on a clothes tree with the hat. He carried his little black bag over to the desk. He and his bag were inseparable.

"Nobody seemed to know where you were," I said. "Even your wife—"

"She wouldn't," he said. He scrubbed his hands together briskly. "Had an emergency call. I drove to the finest section of town. Upper crust. The husband had a gunshot wound. She said she'd shot him accidentally. Anyway there was a lot of blue blood spilled. And she was crying over it. Bullet hit the sternum." He pressed his own chicken-sized breastbone with his middle finger. "Buttonhole fracture. Had to give him two transfusions. Bedside watch for hours. He'll pull out of it now." He gave me a steely glance. "This is a private communication, Runyan. Not to go any further than us."

"I understand. Doctor's honor. Hippocratic Oath and I swear by Apollo." I cleared my throat. "I should have called in the police about this other thing—the body that I was supposed to dissect. But I hesitated, since you'd signed the order."

"I never signed any order. I don't know anything about it. What name did you give her?"

"Peg Balriddel," I said. "She said she knew you."

I saw Laurent's Adam's apple jog. "She said? But, great Scott, she's—"

"I met her at lunchtime—when she was still alive."

Laurent stared at me, fascinated, as if I'd just crawled out of a cocoon.

The door opened and Riis appeared. When he saw me his foot froze for a second, then he came on in.

Laurent swiveled his head to look from one to the other of us. "You two look as if you'd been in a barroom brawl," he said. "Definite ecchymosis."

Riis was stacking up his courage with anger. The finger he pointed at me trembled. "After tonight, you're finished. Your expulsion from this medical school, Runyan, has been long overdue."

I kept cool. "Is there anything missing from your wallet, Dr. Riis? Don't bother looking. I've got it."

His hand jerked back as if it had been stung. His face turned white. "What're you talking about?"

But he knew well enough what I was talking about. I'd tipped my hand now and I'd have to go ahead carefully.

"Let's get to the bottom of one thing at a time," said Laurent testily. "If it's necessary to expel—"

"You won't," I said confidently, "after you've talked it over with Superintendent Riis. I like medical school. It's fun," I said with a grimace. I thought of something else. "I may even take a postgraduate course."

Riis kept shooting me hidden glances. I figured he must have been wondering how much I really knew. I had the weapon that he was using on Laurent and he'd do anything in his power to get it back.

WE HAD Laurent puzzled. He didn't know what we were talking about. He broke in, "I want to get this mystery of the woman's body cleared up to the satisfaction of all." His eyes searched me. "What did you do with that order I was supposed to have signed?"

"It's right here," I said. It was still in my pocket. I took it out and laid it on his desk.

"It looks like my handwriting," said Laurent, blinking at it. "Damned

if it doesn't. But I never signed such a thing." His head jerked. "Did you, Riis?"

"No!" said Riis, distinctly riled. "And you know it!" He warmed up. "Are you accusing me of forgery? Do you want me to accuse *you* of something?"

"No, no." Laurent appeared to be rattled. He took off his eyeglasses and held them up to the light. The exposed eyes darted back and forth like two pale little mice let out of a trap. The lenses of the glasses were streaky. Laurent cleaned the glasses, saying in a subdued tone, "I'd appreciate hearing somebody's opinion."

"I have no opinion," said Riis brusquely. "I have nothing to do with any of it."

"No?" said Laurent. There was a volume of distrust packed into that single word. He turned to me. "And you, Runyan?"

I wasn't going to tell them all I knew. Just enough to throw a fright into this pair of conspirators. "I met an attractive blonde at lunchtime. A chance meeting. She mentioned that she was going to see both you doctors."

Laurent nodded wearily. "The past catches up."

Riis eyed him. "You can't get away from it, Laurent."

"And you'll never get away *with* it, Riis," said Laurent.

"When you called me to come over here," said Riis, "you know what I told you on the phone."

Whatever Riis had told him must have been pretty hard to take, because Laurent looked as if he were licked. He tried to bolster himself weakly. "You've a vile mind, Riis. Vile."

Riis sneered. "What are you going to call it this time? Another doctor's mistake?"

We were having a sort of a weird triangular duel. Riis knew that I had the prescription and he had never liked me on general principles, so

that put him smack against me. I was trying to figure out what was flashing like invisible swords between Riis and Laurent. As far as I could guess, Laurent thought that Riis still had the prescription. Riis was bluffing along. Riis must have recently reminded Laurent that he could still go to the jug for fifteen years on the manslaughter rap. But Riis could now add a deadly rider to it. Had he accused Laurent of killing Peg Balriddel too?

Riis said, "It won't be very hard putting all the guilt where it belongs."

I saw Laurent's small shoulders slope down. It was as if Riis had laid a heavy weight on them. Laurent was no longer the fighting bantam that I'd entered the office with. The look in his eyes was genuinely morbid.

My studies in psycho were making me very conscious of the mental attitudes of the people I met. I thought I had Laurent pretty well tagged. He had a tendency to being moody—full of activity one second and in the dismal dumps the next. When he was low, you had to be careful to keep him out of a blue funk.

Laurent's cracked voice startled me. "I'll try to clear up that cadaver business. Someone made a mistake somewhere."

"*You* made the mistake," accused Riis.

Laurent parted his lips and breathed thinly. "Why go on?" he said. "The game isn't worth the candle."

"What game?" I said. His face scared me. It was lined with waxy melancholic hollows.

His hand had fallen on his medical bag. The fingers caressed the metal catch. "Do you know what it's like to kill somebody?"

The words rattled like Indian dice being shaken up in a skull and I realized with a shock that he was asking me the question. I screwed my face up into a very sorry grin. "As a doctor, I expect to fill a cemetery."

I doubt that Laurent even heard

my grisly joke. He sat hunched forward, looking up from the depths of despair. "I'm in it," he said. "It's like swimming in glue."

RIIS had been studying Laurent. He glanced sharply at me. "If you haven't anything more to tell us, Runyan, you'd better go. You've caused enough trouble already. Dr. Laurent is very tired."

"There is one more thing," I said. "I think I can prove that Peg Balriddel was murdered—yes, I said murdered—upstairs in the operating theatre."

Riis looked at me with distaste. Laurent started mumbling. Riis said, "What gave you that hare-brained idea?"

"Somebody got blood on a gown."

"What gown?" snapped Riis.

"I'll get it and show you." I gave both of them a hard glance, turned and strode out of the office. I went with rapid strides along the hall to the stairway leading to the basement.

The gown that I'd wadded behind the fire hose, was still there. I pulled it out and struck the gray dust from it. With this in my hand, I was going back to accuse Laurent of murder. An imbecile could figure it out.

I started to return to the office, mapping what I'd say to Laurent. "All right, Laurent," I'd say as I walked in, "come clean." Laurent would start up, frozen to the marrow. "You're through. Sunk," I'd tell him. Laurent would try to recover his wits. A last desperate attempt. "The police are on their way, Laurent." That would be a lie. I didn't have anything yet to get the police on their way. Laurent would try to cover up his confusion. "You're on the spot, Laurent," I'd say. "I'm onto you. That dame was Frank Balriddel's wife. *She* had the prescription, she was getting needy, and she came here today to blackmail you with Riis's help. The best thing you can do is confess that you killed her." Laurent

would smile a little smile of defeat. You'd have to hand it to him. "All right, Runyan," he'd say. "You win. I'm . . ."

I walked into the office—and stopped dead.

Riis was standing in there, a dazed look on his face. He was holding a tiny vial. On the floor, halfway to the door, lay Laurent.

"What happened?" I cried.

Riis's glazed look switched to me. "He kept talking in gibberish. Riddles. Kept saying the game wasn't worth it. He took this vial out of his medical bag. He drank it right down while he was talking to me. I didn't have a chance to stop him. Then he got up and staggered toward the door. He fell insensible—like this!"

I stumbled forward and went down on one knee beside Laurent. I turned him over off his face and smelled the odor of bitter almonds. "Hydrocyanic acid! Sure death!" I leaped to my feet. "Stop standing there!" I cried. "We're doctors! Let's do something for him! Get a stomach pump! I'll phone the hospital!"

Riis shook his head. "I'm afraid we won't make it. He took too much."

I shoved him out of my way. I made the emergency call, then prepared a hypo of atropine sulphate. But as I crouched to give it to Laurent I knew we were ministering to a corpse.

Riis verified it by checking the pulse and saying, "Gone."

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER suicide for the books. The ambulance arrived in a few minutes. The intern tried a few more things on Laurent, but it didn't make a bit of difference. The body was carried out on a stretcher and I listened to the ambulance siren fade out in the distance.

Riis had melted away somewhere.

I couldn't resist going on up to the operating theatre to see if my theory had been correct. That's where I'd

been heading when I met Laurent in the main hall. I didn't like the thought of treading up the dim stairways. I rode up in the self-service elevator that ran from the roof to the deadhouse door.

The operating theatre was in the dome of the building. All the lights were out, of course. I found a switch in the corridor outside and threw it on. I saw the way brighten ahead of me. I elbowed through the swinging doors into the anesthetizing room. Pink tiles crackled under my heels. The next pair of swing doors had oval panes in them. I could see the tiers of seats beyond.

I pushed through and the doors puffed closed after me. The theatre was like a small Colosseum and I was down in the arena. The empty rows of seats seemed to be filled with the ghosts of mocking students. What was I doing down there with the professionals? On one side of the arena was a great glass-fronted cabinet, its shelves glittering with steel instruments. I looked at the floor.

This was made of white tiles. And the floor was slightly banked all the way around so that it could be washed off easily into the brass-lipped drain in the center under the table. It required only a few buckets of water to swill away great quantities of blood. There weren't many blood drops to be seen.

But there were a few.

I stood there looking down at the floor. This was where the murder had been committed. This was where Peg Balriddel had been butchered, jugulated.

I heard a small *whooshing* sound, the kind a swing door makes when it meets a cushion of air.

None of the doors that I could see were moving. But there were others that I couldn't see. Outside.

I started to edge myself around the lower end of the stiff white operating table. The galleries seemed to be filled with eyes. I heard an

auto horn toot far away across the campus. I felt very lonely.

Then, as I stepped along crabwise, all the lights went out.

Someone had pulled out the switch in the corridor. I was blinded by the blackest darkness I'd ever encountered. I stood there in a cold sweat. Was this someone's idea of a joke? Or was I the next target for tonight? There had been two corpses already. Did corpses—like in the old superstition—come in threes. I never thought that anyone would want to kill me.

Driven by a spurt of panic, I lunged forward, hands outstretched, until I bumped into solid wall. I wanted to feel my way toward the doors. Then I heard the slight air-cushioned *whoosh* of the swinging panels again. There was the little scrape of a heel, very softly, on the tiles underfoot. I knew it wasn't my heel. My feet had grown roots.

I didn't have a flashlight. I didn't have a cigarette lighter. I did have a book of matches, but I wasn't going to dare one of those. I'd only spotlight myself. I'd have to do it by feel.

The darkness was like velvet sleep pads on my eyes. I knew that if I couldn't see, whoever was with me couldn't see either. That was a faint consolation. I uprooted myself and scraped my hands along the wall in the direction I hoped the door would be.

THE other footfalls moved with less caution now. I heard something strike against a sheet of glass. My friend must have reached the instrument cabinet. There was a rattling sound. The cabinet was locked. Then there was a loud, nerve-tearing crash as the glass front flew to splinters under a sharp blow. Shards of glass tinkled on the tiles. I heard a hand scrabbling in among the keen-edged instruments, the falling steel making its own ring as it clattered on the floor.

Instruments. A scalpel to cut *my* throat?

I fought frenziedly to pry the darkness apart. My toe struck an empty tin drip-bucket and it gave off an uproar like church bells. I could hear the other feet tripping forward, the heavy passionate breathing coming nearer.

There was no use standing up to it. I dropped down on my hands and knees while the sweat ran off my chin. I tried to hold my breath so that I wouldn't give my position away. My nerves were spiraling upward like a circular staircase. The feet shuffled right up beside me, then a pair of knees struck me over the kidneys and the killer looped right over me, face first toward the floor.

I didn't know whether the person was still armed or had lost the scalpel in the fall. We were all tangled up now. I reached up, trying to find the arms and the hand with the razor-bladed knife in it. I grasped the sleeves of a cloth coat and wrestled.

I felt the scalpel all right. It came down, slashing the back of my hand. I seized the wrist and twisted it back at an awkward angle. There was a tight-lipped grunt of pain and I heard the knife drop. Locked together, my assailant and I rolled over and away from it.

Deprived of the knife, the killer set on me with kicking, scratching and biting. I kept belting out in the dark, trying to find a face. I finally did find it and I thought I'd broken all my right-hand knuckles doing it. The killer went limp. I got a handful of coat collar and dragged along the wall till I found the doors, then out into the lighted corridor.

The killer, with the bruised face, tumbled silvery hair, and rumpled evening gown under a casual wool coat, was Mrs. Irene Laurent.

You can bet that Irene Laurent had a good lawyer. He grabbed me that same night in the record room at the police station where they'd locked her

up. He said that she wasn't guilty of anything. I was a maniac. I'd attacked Riis earlier tonight and then I'd attacked poor Mrs. Laurent in the dark operating theatre. I was a beast.

"How can you prove different?" he said sneeringly.

I'd try. "She wanted to kill me because she blamed me for the way things turned out. If I hadn't started the fuss, Laurent might not have taken his own life. There goes her meal ticket. She also wanted to get the prescription back in a hurry."

The lawyer wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Your story has more holes in it than a music roll."

I said, "The cops have that operating gown that I found in the laundry. The stains on the sleeves will be the same type blood as Peg Balriddel's."

"Mrs. Laurent never wore that gown."

"She did. It has peach-colored streaks inside around the neck and shoulders. Know what that is? Ordinary face powder, mister. Irene was bare-shouldered since early this afternoon. She told me so herself. She wore a strapless dress. Her shoulders, chest, and arms were powdered with Peach Rachel. That's something else the police can match up too."

THE lawyer was getting ready to sneer at me again, just to be nasty, when a cop came in to where we were. The cop was carrying a bundle of women's clothes in his hands. He spilled them all out on the table in front of me.

"Ever see any of them before, Runyan?"

The rummage consisted of a mink-dyed coney stroller coat, a gray flannel suit, an ostrich pompon hat, a plastic nailhead handbag, baby doll patent leather pumps, butterscotch nylons, capeskin gloves, frilly snap garters and tea-rose undies.

"I've seen them," I said. "All but the garters and undies. Those're the

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Crimson Galahad

By
Russell Bender

It looked like Graham's last publicity job — for he advertised himself too well as murder's handyman

YOU'RE dead," Eleanor Hill said. "Absolutely dead. There isn't a studio in Hollywood that will touch you." She took off a pair of glasses with thick weightless shell rims and laid them on the desk with an air of finality.

"You'd think I was an actor," Graham said, and winced. He didn't want



anybody, even himself, to think he was an actor. He reached for his hat.

"What actually happened?" Eleanor asked.

Graham looked gloomily around the office. One wall was tan and one was cream, and the windows were huge shiny parallelograms. Outside, Vine Street was bright with midday California sunshine.

"I had a few drinks," he said.

"You call that an explanation?"

"It satisfies me."

Eleanor smiled faintly. She said, "A twenty-thousand-dollar job blown up in an alcoholic haze." She shook her dark head in wonderment. "Headlines: *Would-be Employee Punches Producer*. And Leo Bannister, at that! That's like the old turkey of man-bites-dog in this town." She hesitated. "Who was the girl?"

"What girl?"

"Knowing you," Eleanor said, a trifle bitterly, "there *must* have been a girl."

Graham didn't notice the bitterness. "You overrate me," he told her. It did not occur to him that he did indeed know a great many women. He shrugged. "You're right this time, though. Bannister's secretary was the worm in the apple."

"Damn you," Eleanor said.

GRAHAM looked at her. He could never quite accustom himself to the fact that Eleanor Hill had the same reactions as other women. He was astounded to find her jealous.

He studied her. She wore a crisp fresh linen dress with a small peacock painted at the hip. She had a doll's face—a face saved from the commonplace by a kind of animated hauteur. The girl had poise. Her eyes were ice-blue. Their lightness was startling against her dark smooth skin. Her hair was black as ebony. It was piled on top of her head so neatly that it reminded Graham of a lacquered, intricately woven, basket.

He had known her for five years. She had been on publicity for Cale-

donia Pictures when he had been a police reporter on the New York *Evening Call*. Now she was a big-time Hollywood talent agent. It had been natural for him to come to her when he had grown tired of reporting and interested in publicity himself. He sighed. It made him a trifle sad to find her jealous—and still so highly polished, so businesslike, so apparently unapproachable.

He stood up and put on his hat. He was tall and slender and blond, and his tailored tweeds hung loosely without being baggy.

"Bannister pinched his secretary," he said, and paused. "What's her name?"

"Kathy Conner."

"Bannister pinched Miss Conner," Graham said. "Never mind where. He pinched her about eighteen times during the evening. I had the idea that she didn't object because if she did, it would mean her job." He hesitated. "I could be wrong about that." He pivoted and started for the door.

Eleanor never used his first name. "Graham?"

"What?"

"Wait a minute." She punched down a key on her inter-office communication box. "Get me Leo Bannister," she said briskly. To Graham, she said, "How about dinner tonight?"

"I couldn't afford to buy you a hot dog."

Eleanor's telephone rang. She picked up the receiver and a difference came into her voice. It dripped honey.

"Leo, darling," she said. She waited, for what seemed to Graham, an interminable time. "Now, darling, don't be childish." Again she waited. "Of course, I'm a good agent. Graham's one of the finest publicity men to come out of New York. . . . No. . . . No. As a matter of fact, he's here right now. He's been asking me if it's all right for him to drop in on you and apologize." She winked boldly at Graham. "Leo—"

Graham grimaced and walked out.

Down on Vine Street, he looked irritably at the clear California sky and then walked four blocks to his hotel. When he reached his room, his temper was boiling. He didn't like women, even big-time Hollywood agents, to intercede for him.

His telephone rang. He didn't answer it. He spent the afternoon ignoring his telephone, lying across the bed, and drinking hourly bourbon-and-sodas.

A few minutes of five he walked into Leo Bannister's Hollywood office on the Sunset Strip. He was pale. His jacket was wrinkled because he had spent most of his time on the bed with it on. He stood beside a huge blond beech desk looking down at Leo Bannister's secretary. There were three white telephones on her desk.

"Hello," he said.

Kathy Conner looked up at him in alarm. "Y-yes?"

Graham winced. There was something about this girl that baffled him. He couldn't decide whether she was a victim of circumstances or whether she was the kind of dame who allowed employers to pinch at will. If she were that kind, he felt he could apologize to Bannister. It was one thing to defend a woman's honor; it was quite another to butt into a man's private life.

He said, "Is Bannister in?" He didn't really care. The girl still baffled him, and he was only stalling.

She nodded toward Bannister's private office. "Yes," she said, "but he won't see you."

Graham winced again. The girl was a combination of small town simplicity and Hollywood glamor. She wore a simple navy-blue dress with gold buttons. But her hair was platinum. She wore no make-up but, also, no hose. Her long slim legs were tanned a golden brown.

He braced himself. A twenty-thousand-dollar job depended on whether

or not he thought the girl an easy mark. That was the reason he was here—to find out.

He said, "How about dinner?" The moment after he said it, he fingered the lone five-dollar bill in his pocket.

Kathy Conner was not, of course, following his thought processes. "I think you're crazy," she said.

Graham nodded. "I probably am. Well?"

"Mr. Graham," she said icily, "have you seen the gossip columns?"

Graham hadn't. He said so.

The girl pushed a folded newspaper across the desk. A paragraph was encircled in pencil.

Who was the ex-New York newspaper reporter who punched Leo Bannister in Nino's last night? And over what former movie actress?

"Movie actress?" Graham echoed.

At that moment Leo Bannister walked out of his private office. He was a small man of about fifty with straight black hair brushed flat to an enormous head. His face was sunburned like a lifeguard's, and he, too, like Eleanor Hill, wore glasses with thick weightless shell rims. His cream-colored sports coat failed to hide his heavy paunch. There was a strip of adhesive tape across his chin.

He saw Graham and immediately retreated into his private office. The door slammed. Even before Graham had a chance to say anything, a buzzer sounded on Kathy Conner's desk.

She picked up a white telephone. "Yes, Mr. Bannister. Yes, Mr. Bannister. Yes, Mr. Bannister."

Then she hung up and looked at Graham. Her large grayish-green eyes were very cold.

Graham said, "I can take a hint." He wheeled and walked out.

There was a cocktail lounge next door to Bannister's office building. Graham went in and sat at the bar. He noted with satisfaction that it was five o'clock and time for his hourly burbon anyway, and, conse-

quently, he was not breaking any of his daytime rules.

He had his bourbon and paid for it with the five-dollar bill. When the bartender handed him his change, he looked at it remorsefully and decided Kathy Conner was the kind of girl who could be easily pinched.

People began drifting in from nearby offices. Graham decided that, after all, the day was through and ordered himself another burbon.

He wondered if Leo Bannister were still in his office.

GRAHAM had another burbon and looked at the electric clock over the bar. It was almost five thirty. He went out of the bar and re-entered Bannister's office building. He felt very cheerful. Great sonorous sentences of apology were knocking about in his brain.

In the lobby of the building he came face to face with Kathy Conner.

He smiled at her. Right now he didn't blame Bannister for pinching her. The sonorous sentences were still knocking about in his head.

"You look very beautiful, my dear," he said, and almost bowed. He checked himself. "Is the boss still in?"

"No," Kathy Conner said. He discovered she was very pale.

"What's the matter?"

Her large eyes looked frightened. She started around him without speaking, but he shifted and blocked her.

"Look," he said, "I'm not poison." Suddenly it was very important that she should think that he wasn't poison. "I'm going up to apologize."

Kathy Conner stiffened. She took a step away from him as if in sheer terror. Her hands clutched a navy-blue shoulder bag at her side.

"He's . . . gone," she stammered.

Graham looked at the navy-blue shoulder bag. The end of a tan silk scarf hung out under the bag's wide flap. The end had a dark wet reddish stain.

"That's blood," he said.

Kathy Conner started around him again. Graham reached for the bag, automatically, and got both hands on it. The girl screamed and twisted away. The bag's strap slipped off her shoulder, and the bag was left gripped in Graham's hands. A couple in the lobby stared at him in wonderment.

Graham didn't say anything. The couple, following a Hollywood tradition of minding their own business, went out hurriedly. Kathy Conner stood staring at him a moment and then, sobbing, ran out behind them.

Graham, as he often did in moments of great stress, tugged at an ear lobe. He looked around and was relieved to find that the lobby was now empty. He opened the bag. The scarf looked as though it were a woman's ascot, and there were only a few places where the tan was not stained with blood.

Graham shut the bag quickly. Then he went to the door of the building and looked up and down Sunset Boulevard. Kathy Conner had disappeared. He went upstairs to Bannister's office.

THE main office door was unlocked. Kathy Conner's blond beech desk was empty. Graham's Scotch brogues, scuffling against the deep nap of the rug, sounded loud in the office stillness. He opened the door to Bannister's private office and shut it quietly behind him.

Leo Bannister stood near his desk. His back was to Graham. His shoulders were bent over slightly and he was swaying from side to side. He didn't turn around.

"Dict—dictaphone," he gasped.

Graham ran around in front of him.

Bannister had both hands pressed to his middle. Blood leaked out over his fingers. His gaze was fastened on a dictaphone that sat near his desk.

"Dictaphone," he gasped again. "My—" He coughed. "My—will!"

Graham reached over and switched the dictaphone on. The cylinder

twirled and made a whirring sound.

Bannister looked up. His sunburned face was bleached to a sallowness. His glasses were off and his pale eyes blinked at Graham. Then he recognized him.

"Graham," he said weakly. "Graham . . ." He pitched forward and fell heavily at Graham's feet.

Graham bent over him. In one hand he still held Kathy Conner's bag. He used the other to feel for the pulse behind Bannister's ear. There was no pulse. Graham straightened slowly, his lower lip tight between his teeth.

A noise in the outer office held him rigid.

He crossed to the door of the private office and opened it a half inch. A scrub woman with a faded red bandanna around her head was propping open the main office door.

Graham opened the door far enough to thrust his head out. "I'm sorry," he said. "We'll be busy for a while longer."

The scrub woman sucked a tooth and regarded Graham hostilely. Then she shrugged and reached for the rubber prop under the door.

Graham shut the door to the private office and stood for a moment with his back to it, listening. The only sound in the office was the dictaphone's soft whirr. Graham went over and shut it off. As he did so, a woman's soft cultured voice sounded in the outer office.

"Is Mr. Bannister in?"

Then the scrub woman's nasal drawl: "He's workin'." And added irritably, "He's always workin'."

"I know," said the cultured voice. "I'm Mrs. Bannister."

The main office door closed with a bang.

Graham stood motionless. He reasoned that the bang of the door meant that the scrub woman had gone out, and that Mrs. Bannister was still in the outer office. A panic seized him. He looked around rather frantically for a place to hide and, finding none, made a beeline for the door. He real-

ized he had to head Mrs. Bannister off.

He opened the door and found her face inches from his.

Mrs. Bannister was reaching for the doorknob. "Oh," she said. "I beg your pardon." She was obviously trying to place Graham. "The scrub woman said that Leo was still working. Has he left?"

Graham shut the door behind him quickly. In order to do this, he had to jostle Mrs. Bannister.

"Excuse me," he said. He still held Kathy Conner's shoulder bag. He didn't try to explain it. His voice sounded very strange. "Leo ducked downstairs for a drink," he added.

Mrs. Bannister said, "Leo doesn't drink."

"A coke. With lemon," Graham answered hastily.

Mrs. Bannister hesitated, studying Graham. She was a woman in her late thirties, still lithe and supple and remarkably well preserved. Her face, like her husband's, was darkly burned by the sun, save that her skin had the glow of health. Her nose was peeling. She looked like she could beat hell out of a tennis ball.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

Graham ignored this. He sidled around Mrs. Bannister, saying, "I'll tell Leo you're waiting for him." He didn't even say he knew she was Mrs. Bannister. He was halfway down the stairs to the lobby when he heard her scream.

ON SUNSET BOULEVARD Graham flagged a cab. He decided he'd better stay away from his own hotel. At Hollywood and Vine, he paid off the cab, entered the Plaza Hotel, and in a booth in the men's room examined the contents of Kathy Conner's bag.

The bloodstained scarf had a small hole near the center that could have been made by a small-caliber bullet. Under a celluloid window in a small tooled leather wallet, a driver's license gave a Hollywood address.

Graham counted his money. He discovered he had only two dollar bills and some change.

He went up to Vine Street and hailed another cab. The driver looked curiously at the navy-blue bag hanging from Graham's shoulder, and muttered, just loud enough for Graham to hear, "Well, it's Hollywood."

Ordinarily, Graham might have taken this up but he had deeper things on his mind. Halfway to Eleanor Hill's house in Beverly Hills, it occurred to him that Kathy Conner's wallet might contain money. He opened it and looked. There was a single dollar bill. He swore luridly.

At Eleanor's house he told the driver to wait. Eleanor answered his ring. She had changed to a black mandarin's coat with gold scroll and gold pajama pants. Her pink toes peeked out of small gold-and-black wedgies. She looked more unapproachable than ever.

"Graham!" she said. "I've been trying to phone you all afternoon."

Graham said, "Lend me twenty dollars."

Eleanor shook her head sadly. "I might have known there was a catch to this someplace. Well, come into my wigwam."

Graham followed her through a small foyer and down two steps to a sunken living room that had a shiny black tile floor and a very deep soft ivory rug. A man stood up from a divan and looked at Graham.

"Oh," Eleanor said. "Mr. Harvey, Mr. Graham."

She picked up a glass from a coffee table and looked over it at Graham with amusement.

"Mr. Harvey imagines he would like to marry me, Graham. You run into everything in Hollywood, you know." She drank. "I asked Mr. Harvey to come over to see if we could find some way to talk Leo Bannister out of his present mood—as concerns you, Graham. Mr. Harvey is Leo's assistant."

Harvey said, "So you're Graham!"

He was a tall erect man in his middle thirties with thick curly black hair and very white teeth. He smiled, showing his teeth. He would always make it a point to show them. He advanced, putting out his hand.

"Let me shake the hand that punched the jaw of the Great God Leo."

Graham shook hands with him.

Eleanor said, "You see, Graham?" You're probably being toasted this evening all over Hollywood."

Harvey said, "Especially by a great many women." When he said this, he looked pointedly at Eleanor.

Eleanor said, "Mr. Harvey is a little sore, Graham. I dropped by to see Leo about an hour ago. He doesn't like me to drop in to see Leo."

Graham could feel himself stiffen. He hoped this wasn't noticeable. "About what time?" he asked. He was relieved to find that his voice was careless.

"Oh, a few minutes after five. I dropped by to see if Leo were feeling any friendlier toward you."

Graham was glad he had left Kathy Conner's bag in the cab. He wondered if Eleanor owned a tan scarf.

Harvey said coldly, "Don't pretend, Eleanor."

ELEANOR whirled on him in scorn. "Oh, my stars!" This was such a withering blast that Graham was forced to admire her. Her ice-blue eyes flashed. "The man just reconciled with his wife. Give him credit for a little decency."

Harvey said doggedly, "You don't know Leo." His face clouded. "His wife has more influence in pictures than he does. If she wanted to, she could probably ruin him."

Behind Harvey, near the divan, the telephone rang. He picked it up, still looking doggedly at Eleanor. "Yes. What?" His eyes bugged. "What! . . . Look, Moe, if this is a rib, I'll break your thick neck . . . What? . . . Named him on the dictaphone?" Suddenly he swore. He looked up and saw Graham

and amazement came into his eyes. "Why, he's here now!" He hung up.

Eleanor was watching him anxiously. "What is it?"

Harvey didn't look at Graham. "Leo's dead," he said.

"Dead!"

Harvey said, "Shot twice in the stomach. Moe Rosenberg's in his office now. The cops are there. They say Leo didn't die right away and named his murderer on the dictaphone." Harvey flattened his feet more solidly on the floor but still didn't look at Graham.

"Who?" Eleanor asked. Her voice was hoarse.

"Him," Harvey said, and nodded at Graham.

Graham took his right hand out of his pocket and let it swing free at his side. He said, "Lend me twenty dollars, Eleanor."

Eleanor's face was a little white. "Graham! You didn't—"

"Lend me twenty dollars."

Eleanor's frightened eyes looked at Harvey. "I—" She broke off.

"Listen," Graham said. "I didn't kill him. Kathy Conner can prove I didn't. She's the only one who can. I've got three bucks, a cab waiting outside, and I may need dough to find her. Lend me twenty dollars."

Harvey lunged at Graham. Graham brushed him off carelessly with his free right arm and, pivoting, kicked him in the belly. Harvey's erect body folded like a jackknife. He fell sideways, striking the coffee table and upsetting his drink. He lay doubled up on the white rug, gasping.

Graham looked down at him. "Sorry," he said. He grimaced. He didn't like kicking people in the belly, but this was hardly a time for sportsmanship. "Twenty bucks, please," he said to Eleanor.

Unaccountably, to Graham, she was crying. Somehow he hadn't imagined that Eleanor could cry.

"W-w-wait a second," she said, and flew into the bedroom. She came back with a twenty-dollar bill and a small

pearl-handled gun in her hand. "Y-you w-want this? It's loaded, I think."

Graham shook his head. "Just the twenty dollars." She handed it to him, and he stood looking down at her a moment, watching the tears dampen her dark smooth cheeks. Then he said, "I hope they're not crocodile tears," and went out.

The cab driver was twisted around behind the wheel, studying Kathy Conner's bag on the back seat. He said, "New style, bud?"

His face looked so innocent that Graham almost hit it. Instead, he climbed in the cab and gave Kathy Conner's address. The cab driver chuckled.

KATHY CONNER'S house was hardly a house at all, but the middle apartment of a series of three built on the side of a hill to resemble individual Spanish houses. They were white adobe with red tile roofs. Graham, again telling the driver to wait, left him on the road above the top apartment.

He went down steep concrete stairs to the middle apartment and knocked on a heavy panelled door.

Kathy Conner opened up. At sight of Graham, she tried to close the door but Graham threw his weight against it. He went wriggling in on a kind of quarterback sneak.

"I brought you something," he said.

Her platinum hair was disheveled and her face pink with anger. She called Graham a very dirty name.

Graham, who had learned long ago not to judge women by their epithets, was unmoved. He held out the shoulder bag. "Do we talk about this or do I turn it over to the cops?"

Kathy Conner said, "You took it from me."

"What?"

"A couple there in the lobby saw you take it. You snatched it, remember? They saw you. I don't know their names, but they work across the hall. They'll testify that you took it."

She paused, then added, "You killed Leo Bannister."

Graham said, "I did?" He looked beyond her.

They were standing in a large rectangular foyer. At the end of the foyer, doors opened to a bedroom, which was dark, and a living room where a dim yellow light gloomed. On Graham's left, a door to the kitchen stood open. On his right, there was a closed door. Graham guessed that this led to the bathroom.

"So I killed Bannister. Tell me more."

Kathy Conner said, "Mr. Bannister and I were to have dinner together. We had some—uh—business to clean up. He sent me around the corner to the parking lot to get his car. I can prove that by the parking lot attendant. I brought the car around to the building, but Mr. Bannister didn't come out.

"I started up to see what was delaying him. In the lobby, I saw you coming down the stairs. You looked—well—wild. You told me Mr. Bannister was gone. You insisted I come with you. I refused. You grabbed my arm. When I jerked away from you, you grabbed my bag and it slipped off my shoulder. That couple in the lobby saw you. I even have bruises to prove you grabbed me."

She pulled her navy-blue dress off a smooth tanned shoulder. "See?"

Graham said, "That's where Bannister pinched you."

"Prove it," Kathy Conner said defiantly. She didn't bother to pull up her dress.

Graham was in no mood to be distracted. "So I looked wild?" he said. "I grabbed you, looking wild. Now tell me why you ran away—without your bag."

Kathy Conner looked at him mockingly. "I was *deathly* afraid of you, Mr. Graham. Your attraction for he was—uh—abnormal. You had punched Mr. Bannister the night before, because he had—uh—merely

touched me. I felt you were a psychiatric case."

Graham paused. Worry snagged at him for a moment, shadowing his eyes. It was a very neat case—oh, very neat!—that the girl had built. With that, plus Mrs. Bannister's testimony, plus the assault on Harvey, plus the dictaphone and the scrub woman, the case was virtually airtight. He thought he might have one vague chance. He tried to make himself look indifferent.

He asked, "How about the tan scarf?" His voice didn't sound indifferent.

"What tan scarf?"

"The scarf that was sticking out of your bag!" Graham realized he sounded very excited. He tried to make his voice calm. "The scarf covered with Bannister's blood!" To his amazement he found that this time he was shouting.

Kathy Conner shrugged coolly. "Mr. Bannister was wearing a tan scarf in the morning, but it certainly wasn't soaked with blood. In fact, it went beautifully with his cream-colored sports coat." She paused. "If you have it now, and it *is* soaked with blood, I imagine it will go pretty hard for you."

Graham seized the girl's bare shoulder. She wrenched away from him with a quick savage motion, and laughed. It was a bitter laugh—low, husky, and animal. Her eyes were triumphant.

Graham stood staring at her. Something was wrong. Something about the smoothness of her story didn't quite fit. She didn't have the brains. She reminded Graham of a little jackal that fed on other people's bodies, on other people's brains. He pushed past her and walked into the living room.

There was no one in the living room. He wheeled and came back to the closed door of the room he thought was the bath. Kathy Conner

gave a smothered cry and clawed at him.

He thrust her aside and pushed open the door. It was a bathroom, all right. For the second time that day, Graham found himself looking across a threshold at Mrs. Bannister.

She was quite cool. She said, "Don't come any farther, Mr. Graham." She held a small black pistol in her hand.

Graham whirled on Kathy Conner. "You poor sap," he said.

The girl looked bewildered.

Graham said, "I didn't think you had brains enough to tack together that cute little frame all by yourself. Mrs. Bannister shot her husband, didn't she?"

Mrs. Bannister said coldly, "That will be enough, Mr. Graham."

Graham swung back toward her. "Sure you shot him. You had just reconciled with him after some kind of separation. When you saw the gossip columns today, you realized he was already running with women again. Can you prove the tan scarf isn't yours?"

Mrs. Bannister smiled faintly. "There's no burden of proof on me, Mr. Graham."

Graham said, "There will be."

He was bluffing. He took a deep breath. He had to plunge now, boldly, and he had to make it stick.

"I've got an ironbound alibi. You didn't think of that, did you? When I left your husband's office at five o'clock, I went into the cocktail lounge next door. There's an old New York bartender in there—a man—he paused—"by the name of Benny Quattrociocche. He used to make the best morning whiskey sour on Fifty-second Street. Well, I sat at the bar and talked with Benny Quattrociocche from five o'clock until five thirty. Benny will prove that I *couldn't* have killed your husband."

Mrs. Bannister's faint smile didn't go away. "There's nothing to prove you didn't kill him before five o'clock."

"Oh, yes, there is," Graham said

quickly. "Eleanor Hill happens to be my agent. She saw your husband alive—at a few minutes after five."

Kathy Conner screamed piercingly.

Graham still stood a few inches from the door to the bathroom. Kathy Conner was to his left, between him and the living room. From where she stood in the bathroom, Mrs. Bannister couldn't see Kathy Conner. She said, "Shut up, Kathy!" Her voice was brutal.

To Graham, she said, "I don't think I need worry about Eleanor Hill. Everybody in Hollywood has their price." She spoke loud enough for Kathy Conner to hear.

OUT of the corners of his eyes, Graham saw the reason for Kathy Conner's scream. Eleanor Hill stood just inside the doorway to the foyer. She still wore the black mandarin's coat with the gold scroll. She held her small pearl-handled pistol clutched awkwardly in both hands.

"Graham!" she said excitedly. "I heard . . . heard everything! Get out of the way!"

Graham did two things. He threw the shoulder bag at Mrs. Bannister with a basketball push and hurled himself face down in the doorway.

Mrs. Bannister fired. Her little gun made a small ominous coughing sound, but the shoulder bag struck her chest, unbalancing her enough to send the bullet ricocheting off the bathroom wall. Eleanor Hill appeared in the doorway. She still had her pistol clutched in both hands.

Mrs. Bannister, instead of firing again at Graham, fired at the larger menace—Eleanor and her gun. This bullet rang metallically on a pot in the kitchen across the foyer.

Graham scrambled to his knees. He reached up, seized Mrs. Bannister's wrist, and twisted. Her gun fell, clattering on the bathroom tile. She made a snarling sound deep in her throat and tried to kick Graham in the face. He pulled her arm down, upsetting

her, and sat on her. His breath was whooshing in big gasps.

"Lie—still—or I'll—kick your teeth in," he said.

From the doorway Eleanor stared at him in great relief. "My darned gun wouldn't go off," she said ruefully.

Graham spotted Mrs. Bannister's gun in the corner of the bathroom. He stood up and took Eleanor's gun out of her hand. Sweat stood out in beads on Graham's forehead. Eleanor's gun had the safety on. Graham unslipped a pencil from his inside breast pocket and picked up Mrs. Bannister's gun by pushing the pencil through the arc of the trigger guard.

"Evidence," he said.

He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his face. Then he pushed out into the foyer and confronted Kathy Conner.

She was leaning against the wall, sobbing into her hands.

Graham stepped back to the bathroom doorway. "Come on out, babe," he said to Mrs. Bannister.

Mrs. Bannister was on her feet again. She reminded Graham of a lithe, supple cat about to start on its second life. She strolled out coolly.

Graham wheeled on Kathy Conner. "All right," he said harshly. "Why?"

"W-why what?"

"Why you had that scarf in your bag," Graham said. "Don't stall." He went into the bathroom, brought the bag out, and opened it. "Obviously, that's Bannister's blood on the scarf. That makes you an accessory after the fact. In other words, that makes you as guilty as his wife. You can get out of it, though, if you talk."

He jiggled the small black gun on his pencil in front of her eyes. "This gun will prove she killed him. What were you doing with the scarf?"

Kathy Conner looked frantically at Mrs. Bannister.

"She can't help you," Graham said harshly. His lips curled. "She can't even help herself."

Kathy Conner twisted her hands together. She said, "I—I found the scarf." She looked away from Mrs. Bannister. "In Leo's—in Mr. Bannister's private office. He *did* send me around to the parking lot to get his car. We *were* going to have dinner together. Then when he didn't come out, I went up to see why. I found him"—she hesitated and bit her lips—"bleeding. The scarf was on the floor. I picked it up and tried to stop the blood with it. Then I saw it was hopeless. I—I thought he was dead. I put the scarf into my bag because—because . . ." She broke off and sobbed.

Graham said, "Because what?"

SHE looked up hysterically. "You don't know how much that life can mean to you!" she cried. "The houses in Beverly Hills . . . Bel Air . . . Palm Springs . . . the swimming pools . . . Ciro's . . . Slapsy Maxie's . . . the Mocambo . . . the parties . . . the publicity . . . first nights . . . autograph hunters! You don't know what that can mean! I'd do anything—*anything*—to get it back again! I had it once! I had good parts! Mrs. Bannister could get everything for me again! She has even more influence than her husband!"

Graham looked at her in disgust. He said, "So with Leo dead, you couldn't get help from him, so you tried to get help by helping Mrs. Bannister?"

The girl lifted her head proudly. "Yes!" she said.

"Then you knew the scarf was Mrs. Bannister's, so you carried it away? Then phoned her that I had taken it away from you?"

"Yes!" Kathy Conner said. She looked angrily at Mrs. Bannister. "She couldn't get over here fast enough!"

Graham walked over in front of Mrs. Bannister. "Now I know what you did, babe," he said. "There's a bullet hole in the scarf. You wrapped

(Continued on page 51)

Murder's Problem

By Philip Ketchum



Mr. Tweedy, arithmetic teacher, needs more than figures when he tries to add up this homicide score.

I'VE got to get away early," said the police commissioner. "I can't see anyone else."

The commissioner's secretary frowned. She shook her head. "You really should see Mr. Tweedy before you leave."

"Who is Mr. Tweedy?" growled the commissioner.

"He's one of the teachers at Glen Park Junior High. He wants to see you about the Cartwright case."

"Why doesn't he go to the police branch that handles these things?"

"He probably did," said the commissioner's secretary. "They probably wouldn't listen to him."

"Then why do I have to listen to him?"

"Because you are running for office in two months. There are lots of teachers. Most of them vote. Shall I send Mr. Tweedy in?"

"All right, send him in," the commissioner grumbled. "But I'll see no one else and I'll handle Tweedy in a hurry."

Mr. Tweedy was short. He was plump. He had ruddy cheeks, wide blue eyes and a friendly smile. His smile was very effective in the classroom but it never seemed very satisfactory when he stepped into some other world. He smoothed a hand over his thinning hair as he entered the commissioner's office. He had been wondering all afternoon how he could best approach the commissioner. He still hadn't made up his mind.

The commissioner's office was very large and the commissioner was a man of imposing appearance. He was big, with a square, rugged face which looked good on campaign posters. He had a booming, good-natured voice.

"Hello there, Tweedy," he greeted. "You're at Glen Park Junior High, aren't you? I have heard of your excellent work. I am really glad to meet you."

THE commissioner was standing. He reached for Tweedy's hand. He pumped Tweedy's arm up and down. Mr. Tweedy wasn't impressed. He didn't believe the commissioner had ever heard of him. This was campaign talk and Mr. Tweedy recognized it as such.

"It's too bad I had to keep you waiting," said the commissioner. "It's too bad I have to rush off in just a minute. I'd like to have a real visit with you. Sit down for a while, anyhow."

Mr. Tweedy sat down.

"Have a cigar, Tweedy," said the commissioner.

Mr. Tweedy shook his head. "I'm afraid I'm not used to cigars. We can't afford them on the salary we get."

The commissioner blinked. "Huh?

Oh, yeah. I've been reading about teachers' salaries. Something ought to be done about it."

"Something," said Mr. Tweedy, "ought to be done about a good many things."

The commissioner nodded. He scowled. "Of course. Of course. But there isn't much we can do this afternoon, is there?"

"We can do something about the police department," said Mr. Tweedy. "They have arrested Joe Banner for murder."

"And why not?" asked the commissioner.

"He isn't guilty."

"Then who is guilty?"

"I wouldn't know," Mr. Tweedy admitted. "But I do know this. Joe Banner didn't kill the woman. I had Joe in my classes for three years in Junior High. I know the kind of person he is. I'm sure he isn't a murderer. It's as simple as that. The police are making a mistake, a serious mistake."

The commissioner leaned forward. He said, "Look here, Tweedy. Why don't you just go on being a good teacher? Why don't you leave police work to the police? Wouldn't that be logical?"

Mr. Tweedy shook his head. "We don't live in a purely logical world, commissioner. My classroom is invaded just as I have invaded your office. The parents of my pupils tell me how I should teach arithmetic. My principal tells me. The supervisors tell me. The Board of Education tells me. The State Legislature tells me. I have to listen to all this advice. Some is good. When it is, I follow it. What I am asking of you is not difficult. I am suggesting that Joe Banner did not kill the Cartwright woman. I am asking you to test your solution."

"It will be tested in court," snapped the commissioner.

Mr. Tweedy got to his feet. "That may be too late, commissioner. I want you to test it now."

"The police know what they are doing," said the commissioner. "I still

think, Mr. Tweedy, that you should stick to arithmetic."

Mr. Tweedy smiled. "Joe is a fine boy," he said slowly. "He is engaged to Ruth Graham, who was also one of my students. I can't stand by, commissioner, and let the police—though it may seem they have proper evidence—ruin two lives. I think I shall have to demonstrate that you are wrong."

"Go ahead," flared the commissioner. "Demonstrate."

"Thank you," said Mr. Tweedy. "I shall."

STAN GRABOWSKI was a policeman. He had been on the same beat in the Glen Park area for close to ten years. He was a big man. He had a beefy red face. He was usually scowling. Mr. Tweedy could remember Stan Grabowski as a student in Glen Park Junior High. He had been an indifferent student, unimaginative, not very quick-witted but very honest. He hadn't cribbed or copied in order to get a better grade.

Grabowski had become, in Mr. Tweedy's opinion, an excellent policeman. He might never be the chief or the police commissioner, but he did the routine, everyday work which was necessary, and did it in a steady, dependable fashion.

"Stan," said Mr. Tweedy, "suppose you tell me the story again. I might see some new angle."

"There is no new angle," said Stan Grabowski. "It's like this. The Cartwright dame was about thirty-five. She was divorced. She was man-crazy. Joe Banner was a good-looking kid. What if he was younger than she was? That didn't bother her. She made a play for him. She would drop into the drugstore to see him. She would have a coke. She would give him the eye, try to get him to walk home with her. She was gushy about him. Folks saw that, told the cops about it. She was on the make for him but Joe didn't give her a tumble. He had a girl."

"What happened the night the Cartwright woman was killed?" Mr. Tweedy asked.

"She was in the drugstore that afternoon. She made a crack about when was Joe going to come up and see her. About seven, just before Joe got off, she called up and asked him to bring her a prescription he had on file. Joe tried to get out of it but the boss made him deliver the medicine. It was seven-thirty when Joe got to the woman's house. There was no answer when he rang the bell. The lights were on. Joe thought maybe the woman had had a heart attack or something. He tried the door. It was open. He went in. The woman was in the kitchen, on the floor. She was dead. Her face was scratched. Her clothing was torn. The back of her head was smashed in. Joe called the police."

"It could have happened just that way," said Mr. Tweedy.

"Sure it could," Grabowski agreed. "But the man who lives next door said he was looking out of the window when Joe arrived. He says that the Cartwright woman answered Joe's ring and let him in."

"The man who lived next door," said Mr. Tweedy, "could have been lying."

"They thought of that at Headquarters," Grabowski admitted. "They questioned the man. They even thought he might have killed the woman but it seems that two business associates were at his house from seven until after the cops arrived. During this time, McAdams—that's the man's name—was never out of their sight."

"He still could have been lying," said Mr. Tweedy. "Stan, will you do something for me. At seven-thirty, tonight, can you be in front of McAdams' house?"

"I don't see the point of it," said Stan Grabowski, "but I'll be there."

Mr. Tweedy nodded. He said, "Thank you, Stan."

AT SEVEN-THIRTY that evening Mr. Tweedy rang McAdams' bell. McAdams himself opened the door. He didn't invite Tweedy in. McAdams was about forty-five. He was thin, stoop-shouldered. He had a pale, tight-skinned face, dark eyes, and a receding hair line.

"I am a friend of Joe Banner's," Mr. Tweedy explained. "I don't think Joe killed the Cartwright woman. I'd like to talk to you. My name is Tweedy. I teach in the Junior High."

McAdams was scowling. "There's nothing I can tell you," he said sharply. "I hardly knew the woman. I don't know Banner. I told the police all there was to tell."

"It would still be nice if you invited me in and acted friendly," said Mr. Tweedy.

"Yeah?" said McAdams. "Why should I?"

"If you have nothing to hide," said Mr. Tweedy, "why shouldn't you?"

"Who is it, Bert?" called a woman's voice from within the house.

"Just a busybody digging into the Cartwright case," McAdams answered.

Mr. Tweedy frowned. He said, "McAdams, did you actually see the Cartwright woman open the door to Joe Banner the night she was killed?"

"Of course I did," McAdams snapped. "Do you think I'd lie about a thing like that?"

Mr. Tweedy shrugged. "I don't know. Either you lied or Joe Banner lied."

"Then it was Joe Banner who lied. I saw her open the door. I saw her as plain as I see you now."

"Where was your wife? Did she see her?"

"What's my wife got to do with this?" McAdams flared.

"I don't know," said Mr. Tweedy. "What does she have to do with it?"

McAdams pushed open the screen door. He came out on the porch. He pointed toward the street.

"Get out of here," he roared. "Get

out before I throw you out. Hey, officer!"

Mr. Tweedy looked around. He saw Stan Grabowski on the sidewalk.

"Officer, this man is bothering me," McAdams called. "I want him run in."

Stan Grabowski pushed open the gate. He came up to the porch. He scowled at McAdams. He said, "Look here, McAdams, you treat Mr. Tweedy with respect. If he wants to ask you some questions, you answer them. Don't start getting rough with Mr. Tweedy."

McAdams bit his lips. "I didn't mean to get rough. I just don't intend to be bothered, that's all."

"If Mr. Tweedy wants to bother you," said Grabowski, "you'll be bothered and like it. Go ahead, Mr. Tweedy."

Mr. Tweedy shrugged. He said, "That'll be all tonight but I'll probably be back tomorrow, McAdams. I may want to talk to both you and your wife."

McAdams made no answer but the look in his eyes was not pleasant.

THE police commissioner paced angrily back and forth across his office. There was a knock on his door and a moment later the chief came in. The chief of police was a man of about sixty. He was a grizzled veteran of the old school.

"What's on your mind, commissioner?" he asked.

"Do you know a man named Tweedy," demanded the commissioner.

"If he's a teacher at Glen Park Junior High," said the chief, "he came in to see me a couple days ago about the Cartwright case. He thinks we have arrested the wrong man."

"He came in to see me, too," said the commissioner. "Last night he went to see McAdams, who lives next door to the house where the Cartwright woman was murdered. He practically accused McAdams of being the murderer. Later he went to see Sam Mason, a fellow who used to

go around with the Cartwright woman. He gave Mason a bad time. There was a policeman with him named Stanley Grabowski."

"I didn't know that," said the chief, scowling.

"We can't have things like this going on," said the commissioner. "Transfer Grabowski to Inglewood."

"He's a good man for Glen Park, commissioner."

"Then call him up on the carpet and rip him apart. Say, you don't suppose this Tweedy is right, do you?"

"Of course not."

"Has Joe Banner cracked?"

"Not yet, but he will."

"What about McAdams? Could he have killed the woman?"

"He has an iron-clad alibi."

"That's all I wanted to know," said the commissioner. "I'll take care of Tweedy right now."

He crossed to his desk and put in a call for the superintendent of schools.

MR. TWEEDY received the summons to the principal's office just before the final bell that afternoon. He finished giving the assignment for the next day, held the class until the bell rang, then gathered up his books and papers and walked down the hall. He was admitted at once to the principal's office.

Mr. Eldridge, the principal, was there. He looked worried. Mr. Hogarth, one of the assistant superintendents from the administrative office, was there. Mr. Hogarth looked grim. Miss Symanthia Briggs, a supervisor whom Mr. Tweedy detested, was there. Miss Briggs had a gleam in her eye.

"Sit down, Tweedy," said the principal.

Mr. Tweedy sat down. He rested his books and papers on his knees. He looked around the room and smiled.

"This is the man," said Miss Briggs, "who once told me that if a train ran forty miles in one hour it might take

more than two hours to run eighty miles."

"And it might," said Mr. Tweedy. "In the eighty miles it would probably have to stop at some station."

"The problem in the book," Miss Briggs pointed out, "says nothing about a station."

"We are not here to talk about trains," said Mr. Hogarth.

"It is the principle of the thing," said Miss Briggs, "which is important. For instance, if a man can hoe an acre of corn in one hour, why shouldn't he be able to hoe two acres in two hours?"

"He might get tired," said Mr. Tweedy. "Or there might be more weeds in the second acre."

"Please, Miss Briggs," said Hogarth, scowling. "We are not here to discuss weeds. It is rather serious when a member of our organization interferes with the police."

"I knew nothing about this," said Mr. Eldridge. "Nothing at all."

"Of course you didn't," said Mr. Tweedy. "The fault, if there is any, is mine."

"Then you admit it," said Hogarth.

Mr. Tweedy nodded. "I admit that as a private citizen I ventured to question something the police had done. In fact, I am still venturing to question what they have done."

Hogarth shook his head. "I am afraid you do not have the status of a private citizen, Mr. Tweedy. I must insist that you immediately stop what might be called your private police work in connection with what was a very revolting murder."

"I'm sorry but I can't stop," Mr. Tweedy answered. "Is that all?"

"You mean you refuse to stop?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Tweedy.

"I shall have to report this to the superintendent."

"Do so, by all means."

"I told you," said Miss Briggs, "that he would be unco-operative."

Mr. Tweedy nodded cheerfully. He stood up. He crossed to the door. He looked back at Miss Briggs. "Try hoe-

ing weeds some day, Miss Briggs," he suggested. "See if you can hoe the second acre as fast as you can hoe the first."

Miss Briggs sucked in a sharp breath. Her face got very red. Mr. Tweedy smiled and left the office.

"THE chief gave me an awful bawling out," said Stan Grabowski. "He said to stay away from you or it meant the sticks."

"I ran into some trouble myself," Mr. Tweedy admitted.

"What are you going to do?" Grabowski asked.

"I'm going back tonight to see McAdams."

"Alone?"

"I guess so," Mr. Tweedy shrugged. "I think I'll drop in on McAdams at about seven-thirty."

"I'd like to go with you," said Stan Grabowski, "but I wouldn't dare. Do you think McAdams killed the woman?"

"At least, I want to talk to him again," said Mr. Tweedy.

"He could be mean," said Grabowski. "You had better be careful."

Mr. Tweedy nodded. "I will, Stan. I am always careful."

At seven-thirty he was again in front of McAdams' house.

"You again!" McAdams growled as he answered Mr. Tweedy's ring. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

"I probably shall," said Mr. Tweedy, "after tonight. Is your wife home?"

"What's my wife got to do with this?" McAdams grated.

"Perhaps a lot," Mr. Tweedy answered. "Can I come in?"

"Is that policeman with you?"

"No," said Mr. Tweedy. "I am quite alone."

McAdams' eyes were narrowed thoughtfully. He backed away from the door. Mr. Tweedy stepped into the parlor. He glanced around the room. He looked at McAdams.

"Where is your wife?" he asked. "I'd like to see her, too."

"She's lying down," said McAdams. "She doesn't feel well."

"Was she lying down the night the Cartwright woman was killed?" Mr. Tweedy asked.

McAdams moistened his lips. "Why do you keep asking about my wife?" he demanded. "She's not in this at all."

"She might be," said Mr. Tweedy slowly. "You are awfully sensitive on the subject of your wife. From what I have heard, the Cartwright woman was man-crazy. Maybe she was after you as well as Joe Banner. Maybe your wife was jealous. The Cartwright woman was killed in a struggle with someone. Her clothing was torn. Maybe she was fighting another woman. I'm going to talk to the police about this tomorrow. If the other woman was your wife, she might have some scratches on her arms or face. I thought—"

McAdams turned abruptly toward his desk. His face was dark and scowling and he seemed to have made his mind up about something long ago. He looked sharply at Mr. Tweedy, then abruptly jerked open a drawer. He lifted out a revolver, pointed it at Tweedy.

"You've thought too much already," he said under his breath. "I knew I was going to have trouble with you. Head through that door toward the kitchen."

Mr. Tweedy looked at the kitchen door. He shook his head. "I like it in here," he said quietly. "Are you going to shoot me?"

"McAdams' brow was furrowed. "You're forcing me to do something," he said.

"You shouldn't," said Mr. Tweedy, "because there is a scarcity of school teachers. Right now, I am quite essential. Besides, you wouldn't like to die in an electric chair. They tell me it is not at all pleasant."

"What happened next door," said McAdams, "was an accident. You can't prove my wife had anything to do with it."

"The police can," said Mr. Tweedy, "once they get started on the right track. The fact that you are afraid proves it."

"The police won't get started on the right track," said McAdams. "They've already got the case solved."

THE gun in McAdams' hand was very steady. Mr. Tweedy looked at it. He frowned. He wondered if it hurt very much to get shot.

"Was your wife jealous?" asked Mr. Tweedy. "Was that it?"

"What if she was?" growled McAdams. "The whole thing was an accident. Can't you get that through your thick skull? It was an accident. My wife didn't plan anything. Things just happened too fast—like now with you. Can't you get that?"

"We both get it," said the voice of Stan Grabowski. "What happened was an accident. But if you don't drop that gun, McAdams, what will happen to you will be no accident at all."

McAdams turned and looked toward the side window. Mr. Tweedy looked that way. The side window was open about a foot. Grabowski was standing outside, his head level with the opening. His gun was in sight, too. It was covering McAdams.

"Nice work, Stan," said Mr. Tweedy.

"Thanks," Grabowski grinned.

"Did I ever say that to you before?" Mr. Tweedy asked.

"Not when I was in school," said Grabowski.

Mr. Tweedy chuckled. He turned toward the telephone. . . .

The commissioner was cleaning some papers off his desk. "Is anyone else out there?" he asked.

"Mr. Tweedy," said his secretary.

The commissioner scowled. He said, "All right. Send him in."

Mr. Tweedy came in. He nodded to the commissioner. He sat down.

The commissioner cleared his throat. He said, "Mr. Tweedy, I want to thank you personally for your help on the Cartwright case. It is regretful that the public press did not give you any of the credit, but you know how those things are."

"Yes," said Mr. Tweedy. "I know how those things are."

"I telephoned the superintendent of schools," said the commissioner, "hoping to express my appreciation. Unfortunately he was out of the city. I asked for Mr. Hogarth. He was away at an institute. I talked finally with a Miss Briggs. I hope that was satisfactory."

Mr. Tweedy smiled.

"It was the McAdams woman we were after, of course," the commissioner continued. "Confidentially, the police were suspicious of her from the beginning. I believe you understand."

"I believe I do," said Mr. Tweedy.

"Sometime," said the commissioner, "we must have a good long visit. Right now, as it happens, I am quite busy. It was good of you to drop in."

Mr. Tweedy stood up. He smiled. He nodded his head. He turned toward the door.

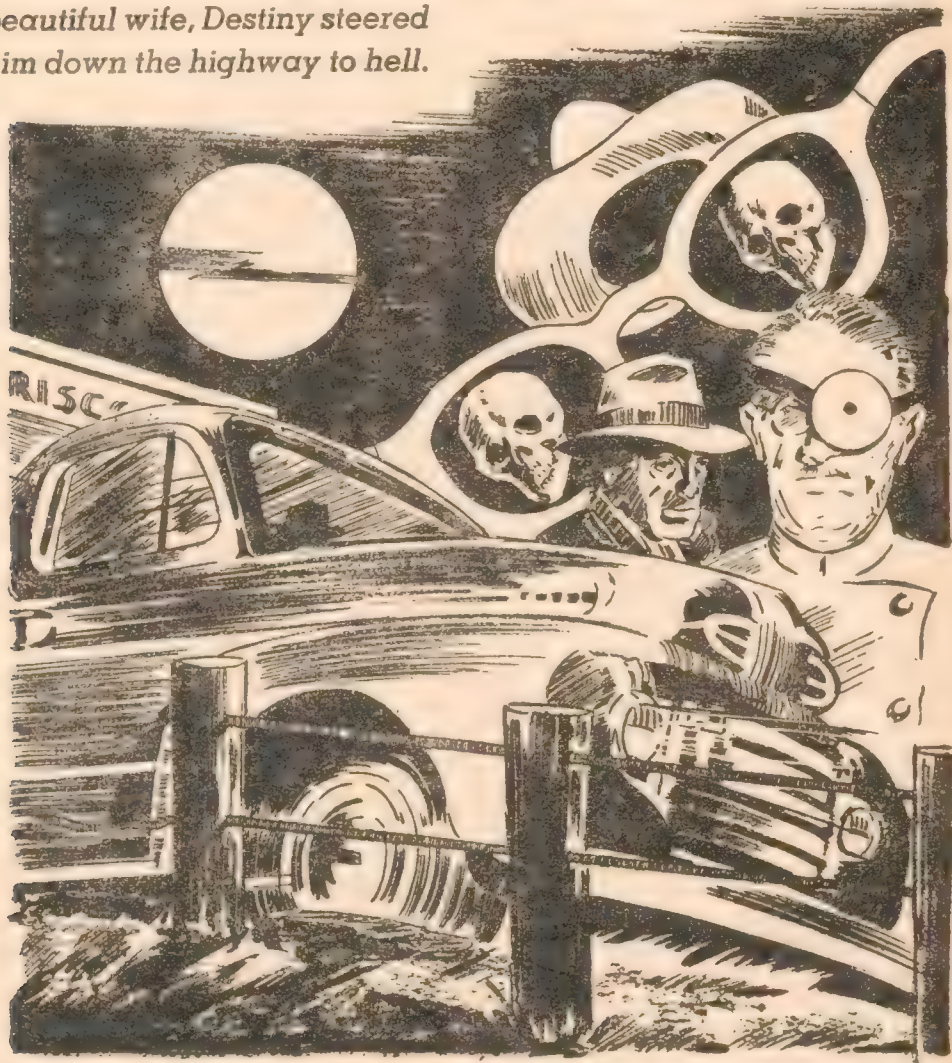




Hireling for Homicide

Dramatic
Mystery Novelet
By Donn Mullally

When Jeff Duncan took the job as chauffeur for the doctor's beautiful wife, Destiny steered him down the highway to hell.



I

"**T**HANK you, Mr Duncan," the girl in the white starched uniform said.

I watched her stamp the voucher I'd dropped on the desk, then hand me a slightly used five-dollar bill. Her smile was done with strings.

"Don't mention it," I mumbled.

I was through at the bank for this week. I'd made my deposit—one pint of blood. With the five wadded in my hot little hand, I broke away from the line of stiff's and headed for the door.

I heard the girl's mechanical thanks to the next bum, and the stamp thumped on his voucher.

This was San Francisco, 1948; the year of the great inflation. Everybody was in the chips. You could sell anything; including your blood—for five bucks a pint. Between milkings there was always the chance of a day's work in a handbill crew, a spot washing dishes or piloting a mop around a saloon. A man could live, if you want to call it that.

I made my regular stop at the Paramount Bar and Grill. Whitey, the bar-

tender, watched me mount the worn leather stool, his ice-blue eyes on guard. I didn't exist until I started ironing the crumpled bill on his mahogany.

Whitey looked at me slowly and said, "Sherry?"

He slopped the wine in a glass and shoved it toward me. In the same motion, he latched onto my five, took it to the register. He didn't ask how things were at the bank. His lip was still swollen from the last time he got too nosy.

I sat there making rings on the dark wood with the bottom of my glass. I can always take the first one—or torture myself. There's a matter of timing; you see how long you can hold out. You sit and let your insides growl while you look at the crumbum in the bar mirror and think it serves him damn well right. Then you obliterate him from your mind.

The Paramount was a joint; anybody who'd drink there would sleep in a doorway. It was one of those places where the cockroaches objected to the customers, and the customers stole the bar rag if Whitey turned his back.

So I wasn't looking for company.

I HEARD the stool next to me scrape. If I was being moved in on, it figured to be some drink-hungry wino attracted by the pile of spongy bills between my two hands. I folded the money, put it in my inside shirt pocket and very deliberately drank my wine.

A throat was cleared. I thought, here it comes, *buddy, can you spare a dime?*

"Duncan," someone said, "let me buy the next one."

I didn't fall off my perch, but I'll never come any closer. I glanced at the mirror. There were two guys looking back at me. The one who needed a shave, with the mouse-colored hair and a shiny blue suit and an open khaki shirt—him I knew. Yours truly,

Jess Duncan. The small, pink-faced man was the joker.

He was immaculately dressed in a dark herringbone suit, a bow tie like a butterfly feeding on his starched white collar. The tie did it. I remembered where I'd seen it last and the rest of the man filled in around it. He'd been wearing a white doctor's coat then. In a double-breasted suit he was an altogether different-looking guy; a real estate salesman or a used car dealer—a pleasant, fiftyish little man.

I knew him as a big shot at the blood bank but I couldn't see him in a dive like the Paramount buying one of the cows a drink. I looked at him warily.

"Sure, Doc," I said, "if you want to."

"What'll you have?"

"I'll make it easy on you—I'm drinking sherry."

He brought Whitey over with a wave of his hand, said, "Two sherries, please."

The doc was really living. But I noticed he didn't seem very eager for his wine. Maybe the cloudy glass wasn't sanitary, maybe he had good sense.

I lifted my glass. "Thanks, Doc," I said. "Here's to Hippocrates."

He nodded, a smile playing around at the corners of his mouth. "Truthfully, Duncan," he said quietly, "how important is that to you?"

I didn't swing on him. "Look, Doc," I replied, "nobody asked you to buy. It was your idea. Now, if you want the story of my life, you can—"

"I know it," the little man said without blinking. "The police medical examiner and I play golf every Saturday. Before the war a promising young cop—inspector on Homicide. Then the Marines—Guadal, Saipan, Iwo—and home with shattered nerves, hypertension."

"So what's all this to you?"

"Nothing—unless I can help."

"Help what?"

"You."

"Doc," I said, "you'd better take your drink down the bar. You'll have me crying in mine, and this stuff is already cut."

The doc didn't. He said, "You're sensitive. That's good."

"What's good about it?"

He laid a soft, pink hand on my arm. "Duncan," he purred, "it takes fight to come back from here. You've got to be mad."

"All right, Doc," I growled. "What're you pitching—the Double A's?"

"Alcoholics Anonymous?" the medico shook his head. "No, Duncan. I have a job for you—one I believe you're peculiarly suited to perform."

"Wine taster?" I cracked.

"No," the doctor went on seriously, "I wish to engage a bodyguard—for my wife."

"Why—somebody after her?"

"I don't know that they are," said the doctor, "but my profession keeps me away from home a great deal and—"

"You want to know what the little woman's up to," I snorted. "Okay. But why me? There are guys who slave over a hot keyhole for a living."

"That isn't quite what I had in mind," he said stiffly. "But let it pass. What's important—I need someone to drive for my wife and I would feel better if he were also a competent bodyguard."

"So you pick a Skid Row lush for the job," I leered. "Doc, I'm sorry, you don't make sense."

He was shaking his head. "Duncan, you're not a Skid Row lush!"

"Wanna bet?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," the little medico smiled. He pulled out his wallet and slipped a hundred-dollar bill onto the counter between us. "A hundred says you come up to my office tomorrow at four-thirty, clean and sober. Buy yourself a suit and a driver's cap, whatever else you need."

He handed me his card. I squinted at it, smiled. "What if I don't show, Doc? Suppose I take your hundred

and throw myself a stylish drunk?"

Doctor Milhau shrugged. "Then I lose, don't I?"

THE little guy was a real gambler. He left me and his hundred in the Paramount Bar and Grill. I couldn't believe what had happened. I looked at the C note like I'd never seen one before, then I glanced at Whitey. He had his eye on that engraving, too.

I said, "Whitey . . ."

His flat face brightened. "Yes, sir!"

"Know what you can do for me, Whitey?"

He smiled a mouthful of gold-capped teeth at me. "What'll it be?"

"Drop dead, Whitey!"

I put the bill away and sauntered out. I looked down the street at the line of flea-bag hotels and joints. I was on top of them, was going to stay on top. I started to walk; past the bars, past the package liquor stores. It was easy—at first.

Then I began to wonder if maybe it wouldn't be all right if I had just one drink, or a half pint of good bourbon. Doc Milhau's money could talk, for sure. "What the hell, Duncan," it said. "How can a few drinks make any difference?"

I was sweating, cold. The lights had come on, neon, flashing and throbbing. The doors I passed breathed beery air in my face. I couldn't go on passing them, not all night. I leaned against a building still warm from the sun. There was juke box music from the bar next door; a drunk staggered out with a dame dragging on his arm. She brayed shrilly.

I knew where I had to go.

The desk sergeant and I were old police school classmates. He looked up as I stumbled through the door of the precinct station. I'd been running, I was having trouble holding the floor down.

"Dunc!" he said. "What's the matter?"

I fell across the desk, gasping, trying to breathe. "Case," I croaked, "Case—you've got to do me a favor.

Lock me up for the night, will you?"

"Sure, Dunc—but . . ."

"Don't argue with me, Case. You might talk me out of it."

"Okay, son," his small eyes crinkled. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I hope so, too, Case."

There was one more thing Casey could've done for me—thrown away the key! That way I would never have got mixed up in the violence that was blooming.

II

THEY let me out in time to buy my trousseau before my appointment with Frederic Milhau, M.D. Doc didn't seem surprised to see me, which made one of us. I was surprised. Bars open early in San Francisco, and I'd walked by plenty of them to get to his office in the Medical Building.

He said, "Duncan, you look fine. I'll be with you in a minute."

I gabbed with his nurse in the reception room while he saw a nervous little woman who had scurried into the office just ahead of me. I learned something. Doc's real racket. Eyes. He was an eye surgeon. His work at the blood bank was strictly charity. I gathered his nurse thought he was the hottest article since Pasteur.

When the Doc was clear, we shoved off. Milhau preferred to drive himself—a forest-green coupé that probably was a pleasure to handle. He jockeyed us through the downtown traffic, and out Bayshore Highway. Nothing passed us. If he was as cute with a knife as he was with that coupé, I could see how he managed to keep in twelve-cylinder cars.

Doc's place was in the foothills back of Burlingame; a low, rambling modern house with a flat roof and more windows than an aquarium. Some mighty queer fish inside, too. With all due respect to Doc, his family was not for me.

Mrs. Milhau and the boy were en-

tertaining in the patio when we drove up. Doc insisted on introducing me. It was Mrs. Milhau's fault I felt like a prize boar standing there with my hackie cap in my hand. The way she looked at me.

The way she looked, period.

She wasn't beautiful like Betty Grable is beautiful; but unless a man was queer for Dresden china, he'd pass up Grable to get to this woman. I wondered why a mild little gent like Doc Milhau had ever taken on that kind of obligation. She couldn't have been more than twenty-eight, a yard of yellow hair, large and restless eyes, a pouting mouth.

"I'm sure you will be very happy here, Duncan," she said, studying me out of the tops of those eyes.

I didn't miss the *Mister* in front of my name until I'd back-pedaled out of there. Milhau's boy and the guests were just faces, background for Madam's act. I felt sorry for Doc.

Milhau turned me over to a rickety old character he called Wembley. An honest-to-God Limey butler—I thought. He'd looked down his long, knobby horn, sniffed, "How'd'ja do," then turned stiffly and creaked toward the back of the house.

We tottered over some flagstones that connected the house with the driveway. Without wasting a lot of conversation, he showed me my quarters adjoining the garage. The room was small but neat; finished with redwood, a single bed, dresser and hand-me-down easy chair. There was a view of the swimming pool from the windows. Especially lately, I'd done worse.

WEMBLEY made himself very comfortable, indeed. He appropriated the easy chair, propped his feet on my bed. The movie butler routine had been checked at the door. He bared his store teeth at me.

"How're things on Mission Street these days?" he asked. "Still get a jug for two bits?"

"You must've been away a long

time," I said, leaning against the wall.

"Two years," he nodded.

"Milhau wrung you out of a bar towel, too?"

The old boy grinned again, his thin gray thatch wobbling as he said, "I was the bar towel."

I laughed. "You had me fooled. I thought you got that nose bumping into buildings in the London fog."

He slouched lower in the chair. "On the level, Duncan," he said, watching me out of the corner of one watery eye, "what do you think of the family?"

"Am I supposed to think?" I countered, coming over to sit on the foot of my bed. I shook a pair of cigarettes out of a pack.

The old joker helped himself, smiling slyly. "You will."

I did the business with a match. "You know the angles," I said. "How about a tip-off? I want to get along here."

Wembley nodded, smoked thoughtfully for a minute. Then he went to work on the Milhauses. Doc was top drawer, a very gentle decent bloke—he'd give me no trouble. Mrs. Milhau and Junior were something else.

In the first place, nobody in the family was even related. Junior was the son of a college buddy of Doc's; his folks had both died during a flu epidemic and he'd been adopted and taken the doctor's name. Mrs. Milhau was a society dame, twice divorced before Doc acquired her. She still went by her sub-deb nickname—Buz, which ought to give me a rough idea.

"You'd better keep a grip on yourself whenever you take Buz out after dark," Wembley advised, his face puckering into a mass of chicken scratches. "Or even on a cloudy day."

I smiled. "I'll remember that," I said. "Now what's wrong with Junior? He seemed like an average enough kid to me."

Wembley shook his head. "Duncan," he wheezed, "if you had said he was an average snake you'd be right. It's mostly the doctor's fault, too—

spoiled the lad rotten. For example, he drives down to Stamford in a new M.G. A hot-rod jalopy won't do for Junior. He's a charter member of the human race; and he'll hand you the bad end of the broom every time he has an opening."

That was about it. We hashed over the family until Wembley had to go back to the house. We sliced up their guests, too. The ex-bar towel didn't think much of them. The Blake Kings of Monterey, Nassau and New York—Buz's friends; and Wembley would cover any bet I wished to make that Blake King and Mrs. Milhau were very warm friends, indeed.

I couldn't care less.

The next morning I got up before breakfast and dusted the doctor's car and Junior's Special. The British-made job was a sweet little outfit. If Junior wasn't mobbed every time he tooled up sorority row, he ought to see his dentist.

I had just finished when the cap-pus flash bolted out of the house with a couple of thin books under his wing. He spared a sullen, hung-over nod as he slid into the bucket seat, kicked the starter. He revved the engine, then let it idle.

He nodded for me to step into the presence. "I would appreciate it, Duncan," he snapped, "if in the future you would drive the car out for me."

Thanks to old Wembley, I expected some crack, so I didn't backhand the punk. I smiled, big. "Yes sir, Mr. Milhau!"

He threw his buggy into reverse and left me in a cloud of monoxide. Nice chap.

I put the rest of the morning in on Mrs. Milhau's yellow convertible. She'd obviously bought it with a mirror in one hand; it was a showcase for her honey-colored hair. I washed it—the car, not the hair—gave it a coat of wax, and polished the brightwork. I didn't know then, of course, it should have been black—black for hearse.

I was on my knees buffing the front

bumper when the boss lady came by bound for the swimming pool. That was my guess, based on nothing more tangible than her white French bathing suit. I happened to see her reflection in the gleaming side of the car as she approached, but kept my head down. I was afraid I'd whistle.

"Duncan," she said, and I knew then where she got that handle, *Buz*. It was in her voice.

I stopped and looked at her. "Yes, Ma'am."

"Duncan, it's lovely," she pouted, "but I wish you had asked me before you did all that work."

I thought, holy cow, what now; but I only smiled like Mortimer Snerd. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Milhau," I mumbled.

She melted me with a smile. "There's nothing for you to be sorry about, Duncan," said she sweetly. "I'm just afraid you've put yourself to a lot of work for nothing."

I probably looked as dumb as I felt.

•So she explained herself. "I want you to drive me to the Kings' ranch this afternoon. It's in the Santa Cruz Mountains—dirt roads, there's not much point in starting out with a clean car."

"That's all right, Mrs. Milhau," I stammered. Her swimming suit *was* getting me. She knew it and loved it.

She smiled again, turned her wedgies toward the path to the pool. Just this side of a big rose bush, she stopped.

"Oh, Duncan," she called, "we'll want to leave about three."

"Yes, Ma'am," I nodded.

I gave that bumper hell.

IT COULDN'T have been more than four-thirty when Madam finally decided she was ready. She romped out to the car, leaving old Wembley struggling with her bags. I grabbed the car door for her as she announced, "I'll drive part way."

I helped Wembley stow her bags in the back end. He took the occasion to jab me with his sharp elbow.

"Remember what I told you," he rasped; and I winked solemnly. As if that was the only thing I'd have to worry about.

As she raced the car down the driveway, I crossed my fingers. And I wasn't afraid of speed. Buz Milhau was wearing a powder-blue item I believe they call a play suit; anyway it looked like one of them to me. Maybe she'd dressed in too big a hurry, but her bare, sherry-brown legs looked good enough to cop a prize in a beach contest. She'd tied her hair with a white scarf that whipped in the wind like a pennant.

I don't believe she spoke to me three times while she had the wheel; and then only to ask for a cigarette. I took it easy, enjoyed the sunshine and the scenery—and I don't mean my boss. About ten miles south of San José, she pulled into a gas station and sent me for her brand of cigarettes. When I returned, she had traded seats.

She smiled. "You can take over now."

I nursed the big, yellow convertible back onto the highway without any casualties; sent her humming across the Santa Clara Valley between the rows of prune trees. My boss might've been figuring the gross tonnage yield in this year's crop for all the attention she paid me.

Suddenly she rapped, "Slow down!"

I lifted my foot off the accelerator, glanced at her as the speedometer needle drifted from sixty-five to twenty. We coasted through a whistle stop named Coyote.

"Okay," said the lady, "pour it on."

She made a nervous ritual of lighting a cigarette. "Duncan," she said, "I'm sorry I spoke so sharply, but I nearly forgot. There's the most obnoxious little policeman in that town. He pounces, but literally pounces, on anyone doing better than twenty-five miles an hour."

"I see," I nodded, keeping my eyes straight ahead.

I heard her gasp. "I suppose I

shouldn't have said that—about the policeman."

"Why not?"

"The doctor told me about you," she explained. "Having been a policeman, I mean." From her reflection in the windshield, my boss seemed a lot closer to me than she had been. She laid a hand on my arm.

"Duncan, would I be out of line if I were to ask you some questions—about police work?"

I snorted politely. "Not if you keep them simple; I was no Sherlock Holmes."

SHE moved in a little more. Maybe it was so she could talk without having her words blown out of her mouth. I hoped that was it.

"I've often wondered how a police department really works," she said. "I mean, it must be terribly fascinating."

"It isn't," I told her with a shake of my head. "Not the way the boys who write the books and movies would have you think, at least." I went on to explain about trick clues and sliding panels and beautiful gun molls and the rest of the hokum. "Say a guy's murdered. The cops round up all his relatives, friends, business associates, anyone else who might've had some connection with the guy. They talk to them, then run down the leads."

I glanced at her to see how she was taking this. I didn't have to strain my eyes. Her forehead crinkled in a frown.

"They don't look for clues at all?" she pouted.

"Oh, sure—if they find anything that might stand up as evidence, like fingerprints, okay. They just don't count on breaking a case with a fluff from the stiff's trouser cuffs."

"I imagine you've solved a great many murders."

"My share," I admitted modestly.

She drew out the history of Jess Duncan a mouthful at a time, until it

spread over the next sixty miles. That was all right, except I found myself liking it—the idea that she was interested. I wasn't so anxious for her to sit on her side of the car, either. I didn't forget all I owed Doc.

How low can a man get?

We left the main highway and drove up a gravel road that wound into the mountains. Buz had me stop once to look back at the ocean. I don't suppose the sunset was different from any other, but it touched the woman beside me. Which made it special.

I remember we were climbing again, I had just turned on the headlights when this panel truck roared around a blind curve in the road. It belonged on the inside, but was coming too fast, had swung wide. There was no place to go; lights seemed to spread clear across the road, bearing down on us. I jerked the wheel, yelled for Buz to jump.

The yellow car catapulted into space, nosing down, and I was clear. I tried to hold back the side of the mountain with a scream, which wasn't quite enough. It hit me like a house falling on an ant. There was confusion, spinning flashes of sky and rocks.

It stopped in a vacuum. A black and very quiet vacuum—all I can say for the preview I had of the place where people go.

I knew it was a preview when light began to creep in around the edges; and when I felt the first twinges of pain. No spook ever felt this beat up. I was alive to my bruises and scrapes before I got my eyes completely open and discovered the light came from a full moon.

Somewhere in the back of my mind a brain cell turned over. The crackup played a return engagement; and the moon, hanging over a distant patch of ocean, gave me a time check. It had to be very late. After midnight.

I raised my head enough to peer into the gully. Far below, moonlight glinted on polished metal. Buz Milhau—I wondered if she was in that twisted pile of junk, if she was alive.

There was only one way to know.

On the long scramble down to the wrecked convertible I lost some more skin, which hardly mattered when I found Buz. She hadn't fallen clear. The car was on its side, and her body, half through the shattered windshield, looked like it would come apart if I touched it. I didn't. . . .

III

FROM the point where I finally crawled back on the road, to a tavern on the main highway, was probably five miles. I could've believed it was fifty. That rambling, rutted mountain road; I measured a lot of it like a worm, on my belly. You'd know there wouldn't be a car along.

Every foot of the way was cheered by the thought that I had to break the happy news to Doc Milhau. Maybe I'm a weak character, but I had another drive pushing me down the mountain. A drink. A general anesthetic distilled in old Kentucky. I never needed it more.

I closed the last hundred yards to the tavern in a crazy, stumbling rush; as though it were a mirage that would vanish if I didn't get there and nail it down. The barkeep eyed me strangely. I was gasping for a double bourbon. He folded his newspaper, moved within a foot of me before he stopped, wrinkled his nose.

"Nothing doing, mister," he said, "you've had enough."

"What d'ya mean?" I croaked. "I haven't—"

"Look," he interrupted quietly, "I want to stay in business. So be a good guy—go someplace and sleep it off."

I knew I wasn't beautiful; my clothes were mostly rags, and filthy. The way I had charged in there wasn't in my favor, either. But I think I could've talked him out of all that, if it hadn't been for what slowly began to seep into my consciousness. A smell—hell, a stench. I'd watched the bar-

keep's nose wrinkle, and I knew why, now.

Duncan stank like a ruptured whiskey barrel. In the open and with everything else on my mind, I hadn't noticed it.

I stumbled outside, found a cement culvert and sat down. That whiskey odor—where did it come from? Why? As I sat there I began to shake; my last prop had just been kicked out from under me.

Not that I expected Milhau to keep me on; but at least I wanted to remember what he tried to do as an act of decency. Now, I wasn't sure it hadn't been exactly the opposite. I didn't reek of booze by accident, any more than that truck *accidentally* shouldered us off the road.

Buz Milhau wasn't the victim of a careless driver—she was a corpse thanks to a very clever and thorough killer. He'd even come back and sprinkled what he must've believed was my dead body with rye whiskey—just to make sure the authorities got the picture. A drunken chauffeur and a high cliff add up to sudden death.

So who knew all about my drinking history—Milhau. Who knew where Buz was going for the week end—the doctor. Who had a motive for killing Buz—I would still bet on Doc. She'd been quite playful with me, was probably more so in her own set. Jealousy might be overworked as a motive, but it was always good.

I huddled on that culvert holding my guts and laughing at myself. All the way down the mountain I'd been tortured for the words to tell my *benefactor* how Buz had died.

I went back to the tavern. Before the bartender could get off any bright remarks, I shut myself in the phone booth, dialed long distance. It didn't spoil my hunch to have Milhau answer. He'd had time to return. He said he was surprised to hear from me.

That I could believe!

I told him there had been an accident, he'd better get right down here. I'd be waiting for him at the turn-

off to the King's ranch. The doc asked if Buz was hurt.

I said, "Not now," and hung up.

NO MORE than an hour and a half later I was crawling into Milhau's coupé. In the glow from his dash panel he looked gray, tense. He said, "Duncan, what happened?"

"We were forced off the road."

"Buz?"

"She's there."

Milhau drove in silence for a minute, then, "Had you been drinking, Jess?"

I was waiting for Doc to come up with that. "No," I leered, "I always smell like this when I'm excited."

He stuck to his driving until I told him to stop. I pointed out the wreck in the first anemic glimmer of daylight.

"I don't see my wife," he wailed.

"You will."

I took his flashlight from the glove compartment and we started down. We didn't need the torch to see, but I had something else in mind for it. Next to a wrench, a flash can be a mighty handy convincer in an argument.

There was going to be an argument, all right.

It began right after he saw his wife's body. I noticed he was wringing his hands, swaying.

I said, "That's quite an act, Doc!"

"An act—what do you mean, Duncan?"

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you were all broken up."

"You know better," Milhau sighed. "You—"

I grabbed his lapels and swung him around, tapped his chin gently with the flashlight to give him the idea. "Yes, I know better. I know about a guy who was driving a panel truck that forced his wife and me off the road. He came back, found Mrs. Milhau dead—and me, he thought I was dead, too. He doused me with rye. Then he went home to wait for the news that he was a widower. Poor

guy—he'd given a lush a break and this was how he was repaid!"

"Duncan . . . I . . ." The doc began to squirm, but I held onto him.

"You're going to talk, Doc—if I have to bend this torch to fit your skull!"

A horn sounded on the road. I saw a station wagon stopping in front of Milhau's coupé. A man got out, came sliding down through the loose shale and gravel to where we were standing. I recognized him. Blake King.

Doc sung his name like a reprieve. I let go of him as King got within speaking distance. He had on a leather jacket, a cowboy hat and his whipcord britches were tucked in the tops of fancy high-heeled boots.

"Doc—what's happened here?" he asked.

I answered for Milhau. "What does it look like?"

The sight of Buz Milhau's body, her blood caked on the crumpled hood of the car shocked King. He didn't move for a minute, then he turned slowly and looked a big question mark at Doc and me.

"How—?"

"A truck forced us off the road last night," I answered. The line was getting stale, almost had no meaning. I watched King shake his head.

"We wondered why Buz didn't get in," he said to Milhau. "I thought of calling, but hated to worry you needlessly. Lord—"

I saw he'd picked up my scent, tried to beat him to the punch. "When I drink, King, the liquor usually goes inside."

"Maybe," he said. He started poking around in the wreckage. I knew what he was going to find. No half-bright killer would overlook a bet like that. When he turned with the top of a broken rye bottle in his hand, he said, "How do you explain this, Duncan?"

"Ask Milhau!" I snapped. "Or better yet, I'll ask him." I faced Milhau, pointing at him with the flashlight. "Doc, tell the man. Tell him. . ."

King was a big guy. With nothing but his fist, he had the stuff to put me away. He connected solidly behind my ear, dropped me to my knees. I saw the toe of a cowboy boot arch for my chin and I couldn't roll out of its way.

WHEN I began to see light once more, it came in like frost crystals, finally took form. I seemed to be in an operating room, stretched out on a table while a fat-faced gent in white fussed with me.

He noticed that my eyes were open and he smiled. "How do you feel, Duncan?"

"Do I have to answer that?" I groaned, shutting my eyes against the glare from the bank of lights overhead.

I kept them closed until he patted my shoulder and said, "See if you can sit up now, Duncan."

With a little help I made it; perched on the edge of the table, naked as a jay bird. The operating lights had been turned off so I was able to look around and notice things. Like bars on the windows.

"This is probably a silly question," I said, "but where am I?"

"The Monterey City Jail Infirmary," clucked the man in white.

He held up a short hospital coat for me, guided my arms into the sleeves. I smelled sweet now, like a bottle of rubbing alky. I was assisted off the table and the doc draped a robe around my shoulders.

"I'm keeping you in sick bay for at least twenty-four hours," he explained. "You need rest as much as anything."

He was telling me!

I hobbled into the ward and eased my aching body between crisp, white sheets. The doc gave me a sleeping pill and set up a canvas screen around my bed. He said, "Pleasant dreams."

Which was the best offer I'd had yet—and I took it.

The next morning I had a visitor.

Doctor Milhau. He was sitting beside my bed when I opened the puffballs I was using for eyes. He didn't look any worse for what had happened; the same dapper, little man.

"I imagine you're surprised to see me here," he said with one of those gentle, fatherly smiles.

"Why should I be surprised by anything you do?" I muttered.

His well-tailored shoulders rose and fell. He didn't have an answer ready and besides, the city medico had just sidled between the screens around my bed. Milhau stood back while I had myself checked. After some thumping, feeling, listening, and general medical mumbo jumbo, the city doctor nodded to Milhau.

"I'll sign a release on him," he said.

I didn't get it, even when Doc Milhau hauled a box from under my bed and broke it open. I saw underwear, a white shirt, tie, and a suit neatly folded in the package, but I was still in a fog.

"What's the gimmick, Doc?" I growled. "What do you want?"

Milhau chuckled. "I posted bail for you," he answered quietly. "Thought you might need these things."

I looked at him and my jaw fell down to my wishbone. "Doc," I said, "I take it all back. I am surprised!"

Which will have to do for an understatement until a bigger one comes along. Milhau helped me dress and we left the Monterey pokey together, started back to San Francisco. Doc was driving, so I had nothing but time to worry over the jackpot question. Why? The doc frames me, delivers me to the can, then springs me.

When I couldn't stand it any longer, I asked Milhau why he'd gone my bail.

The little medico sighed. "I feel I'm responsible for you—at least to the extent of seeing you have every chance to clear yourself."

I counted telephone poles up to ten. "You must be very damn sure of yourself, Doc."

"I am," Milhau nodded, keeping his

eyes on the road. "And I want you to be, too. If you're sent across the Bay, I can't have you festering with revenge because you think I put you there."

"What's to keep me from making you stop the car right here," I demanded, "and beating the truth out of you?"

The doc's lips whitened. "Nothing," he shrugged, taking his foot off the gas. "If beating me up will convince you I had nothing to do with the accident, I'm quite ready."

I believe he was, too. But I didn't test him; I crawled into my corner and made like a mummy. With all the bandages on my head, I was right in character. Maybe Milhau was a brave man—knew a pat hand when he held one and would brazen it through. I wasn't sure.

OLD Wembley creaked out to see me as soon as we were home. He found me on my bed in the garage, puffing a reflective cigarette. "You're looking chipper," he said.

I waved him to the easy chair, tossed him my package of smokes. "Pappy, I've got news for you," I drawled. "You need glasses!"

He hung up on something between a chuckle and a cough; lit a cigarette and sucked on it for a minute. His old eyes watched me expectantly. I knew why he was there, so I filled him in on the whole event—including my suspicions.

Wembley shook his grizzled head at me; Doc Milhau wasn't that kind of a guy.

"How do I know the doc didn't send you out here to sell me that bill of goods?" I asked the old boy.

Wembley's jaw flapped on empty air a couple of times. "Duncan," he said at last, "if you weren't already a sick man, I'd kick you in the teeth for that."

I watched him start to make a shaky take-off from the chair, nodded him back. "Relax, Pop. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. But I'm in a

very lonely spot, I can't take anybody for granted."

"You'll never get off the spot unless you do," he said.

I studied the lines that webbed his face without reading anything unfriendly. "Okay," I said, "you're on the team. You don't think it's Doc Milhau. Who would you work on?"

"You're the ex-detective," said Wembley modestly, "but if I were in your place, I'd want to know more about Blake King. How he happened to arrive at the scene of the accident when he did? How he knew right where to look for that bottle? Why he slugged you when you started asking Doc questions?"

I nodded. "Go on—you're hot."

Wembley's sunken chest heaved as he took another breath and went ahead. "I told you about King and Mrs. Milhau. Maybe it was finished for King, and Madam was being difficult. Maybe she was threatening to cause trouble with his wife. King knew she would be driving that road and approximately when. He—"

The house phone buzzed. I rolled over and grabbed it off the hook, said, "Duncan speaking."

It was Junior Milhau, calling from the pool. He wanted to see me out there right away. I put the phone down and told Wembley.

"But stay with that idea you're working on, Pops," I said as we walked to the door. "We'll kick it around when Junior's through chewing me out."

I GUESS I'm psychic. A chewing was exactly what Junior had in mind. He was slumped in a deck chair, exposing his muscle to the sun, and his brain to a shaker full of martinis. It was the first time I ever got read off by a drunk in a lastex fig leaf.

He removed his dark glasses as I walked up, looked right at me and said, "You've got a helluva nerve coming back here, Duncan!"

"You'd better take that up with

your father, Mr. Milhau," I replied.

He sputtered something about my being a murderer, a bum, an alcoholic; and several other compliments. "Next I suppose you'll jump bail—go down to Mexico so the old man will be out his money, too."

"Your father's money is safe, Mr. Milhau," I said calmly.

"Yeah—like Buz was safe driving with you," Junior sneered, "until the first time you get tanked!"

"For your information, sonny, I wasn't drunk."

"Ha!" he threw back his head. "I suppose you use rye whisky for after-shave lotion!"

I studied the sullen punk sprawled in the deck chair beside the pool, wondering how he'd take having his nose flattened.

"Okay, Milhau," I said evenly, "you've made your point. I'll go back to the Monterey jail. But I want you with me when I tell your father what I'm doing."

We found the old man in his library. Junior had put on a hooded robe, leather sandals; he looked like a monk—if the Brothers will forgive me.

I opened the exchange, saying, "Doctor Milhau, your son has made something clear to me. I've got no right to sponge bail money from you. So I'm going to Monterey to sit it out."

The doc closed a thick book on his forefinger. "Jess," he protested, "this is ridiculous. We understand each other. Junior was completely wrong to assume—"

"I'll make out, Doc," I cut in. "But when you get your money back, hang onto it. You'll need it to retain some high-powered legal talent to keep your adopted boy out of the gas chamber."

Junior did no small take on this. He started to make a crack, but the old gentleman shut him up with a wave of his hand.

"What do you mean, Duncan?" Milhau asked.

"He was the cookie who framed the crash. It would never have occurred to me if he hadn't shot off his mouth. He knew the *kind* of whiskey the killer sprinkled on me. How else would he know that?"

"I could guess," leered Junior.

"All right, sonny," I nodded, "it's not much, but give the police a little time to work on it. Let them check your movements the other day, find out where you borrowed, rented or stole that panel truck. They have ways of making a man talk, Junior. You won't like them. You haven't the guts."

"Hold on, Duncan," interrupted Doc Milhau. "I must insist you tell me why you think Junior would do a thing like that. I know how fond he was of Buz . . ."

"Do you?" I asked. "Are you sure it stopped there—with being fond of her? Your wife was a beautiful woman, Doc; she was only a few years older than his young Nibs. I've heard there's nothing more bitter than frustrated first love."

I glanced at Junior. His face was lighting up the hood over his head, and for my money that glow wasn't sunburn.

"Look at him, Doc," I went on. "Why don't you ask him how he felt about her? Suppose Junior was in love with her—it'd be pretty rugged on him, wouldn't it? I mean, her being married to you, her popularity with the other young bucks. Guys like Blake King."

"Then you hand him a ready-made weapon, all primed and cocked—Jess Duncan, the ex-alcoholic chauffeur. Junior heard the Kings invite Mrs. Milhau to their ranch for the week end; he knew the road, its possibilities as a death trap. All the hate and love and everything else he felt for your wife boiled over. If he couldn't have her, no one else was going to get her. He was a tortured guy, Doc."

That about finished me. I edged toward the door, stopped and looked

at the two silent, taut figures in the center of the room. I said, "Maybe I was playing that too much by ear, Doc. I could be all wet—I almost hope I am."

They didn't miss me.

I went out to my room in the garage and packed what little gear I could call mine. I had it all in a box Wembley found for me, when we heard a shot. I left him at the post as I sprinted back to the house.

Doctor Milhau met me at the library door. I couldn't tell where his hair ended and his face began, he was

so gray, chalky. He nodded me into the room. Junior was lying over the desk with a hole in his head he didn't need.

Doc showed me the boy's written confession. I hadn't been far wrong.

"I was reading it," Milhau said, his voice thick, "when he took the gun out of the desk and . . . and put it to his head. I couldn't stop him."

It looked like it might've been that way. But I hoped the police wouldn't hold out for a paraffin test of Doc's hands.

That would be a damn shame.



Crimson Galahad

By Russell Bender

(Continued from page 30)

the scarf around your little gun to hide it—so you could shoot your husband down in cold blood." He paused. "That's you—cold, capable, and calculating."

He thought that over. "Capable of anything, I mean." Again he paused "When you forgot your scarf after you shot him, you were cold enough to come back for it." He shrugged moodily. "I'll blow kisses at you through the window of the gas chamber," he added.

Mrs. Bannister smiled at him faintly. She sat down on a chair arm and crossed her lean muscular legs.

Graham felt a little sick at the stomach. He turned his back on her and stood looking through the dim living room balcony beyond it, at the glittering lights of Hollywood pin-

pointed below. He discovered that this made him feel sicker.

"Call the cops," he said over his shoulder to Eleanor.

Eleanor said, "They're—on their way. At least, I imagine they are—by now."

Something in her voice made Graham turn. Suddenly she looked like she was going to cry again.

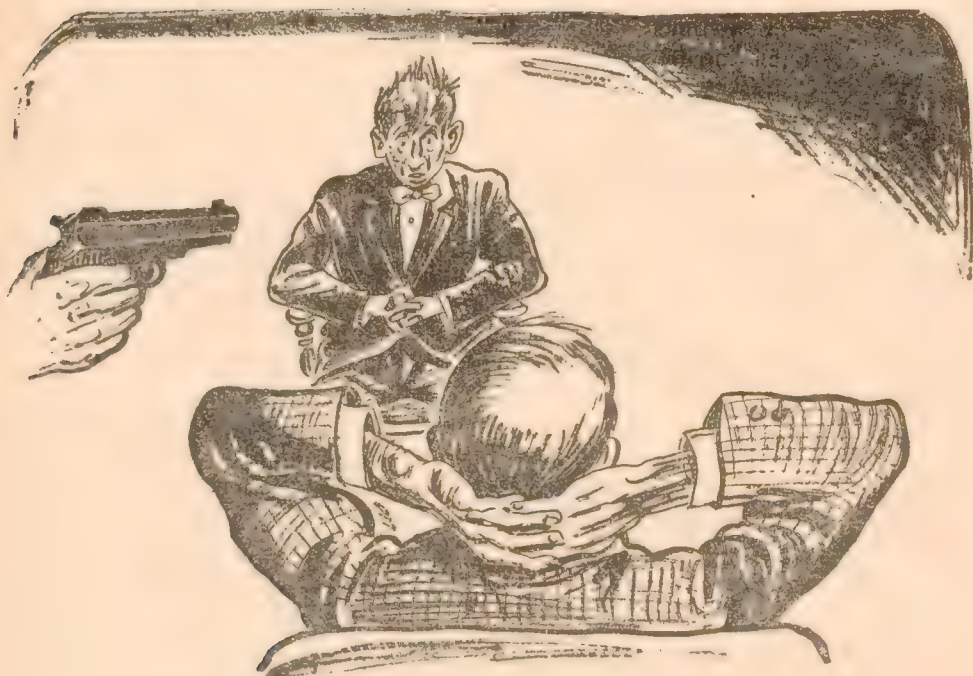
"You told me you were coming here, you know," she said. She sniffled. "Harvey heard you, too, you know. He—he tried to call the cops."

"Tried?" Graham said.

Eleanor nodded. "I—I had my gun in my hand—don't you remember? I—I couldn't let him do that to you. That's why I came to warn you. We might as well kiss your job good-by."

She sniffled again. "I bopped him over the head with the gun," she said.

Remains to Be Seen



“Alvin Hinkey” Yarn

By Joe Archibald

|| *Alvin Hinkey, Gotham gumshoe extraordinary, read a book. The book gave him an idea. The idea led him to a corpse—and to a man who was about to make Hinkey another corpse.* || P

CITIZENS who listen to the radio are apt to think that being a flatfoot is a very glamorous and risky job. They should call at the precinct house where me and Hambone Noonan plan our attacks against the lawless element. It is as bustling as a bank lobby on Sunday morning, and we could consider the robbery of a sprout's piggy bank a major crime to call out all cars.

Hambone Noonan finishes a comic mag late one morning and sighs deeply.

“If we was Russians, Alvin, we

would of been sent to the sticks in Siberia,” he gripes. “It is no wonder they made most of this part of the big town into a cemetery. How did you make out yesterday with that bookie joint?”

“I raided it,” I says. “When I got into the back room I cover three characters with my Roscoe. Then I find they are repairin’ Gideon Bibles. What’s the use, Hambone?”

“You missed up on a good bet maybe,” the lemonhead says. “Did you ast if they had a license?”

I ignore Hambone and pick up a

book entitled *Crimes That Did Pay*. It proves that me and Hambone are not the only liabilities on the force. I read the one having to do with the disappearance of Jud Crater.

J. T. Crater, a D.A., was knocked off three years ago, after he'd begun an investigation into the murder of a citizen who had a fine, upstanding reputation. It seems that the citizen, believing in honest government, went to a questionable district to check up on registered voters and was fatally boffed on the noggin. A politician named Brink was quite embarrassed over an investigation as he was the head man of the district.

They could find nothing on Brink, though, and the rubouts of the vote checker and D.A. Crater went into the slot for unsolved crimes. The baffling part of it all was that Jud Crater's remains were never found.

"Yeah," I says to Noonan, "Jud Crater went uptown and got the goods on a character. Then the world swallowed him up."

"I've got a theory on that," Hambone yawns. "He fell in the subway, hit his noggin, got magnesia and went to the end of the line in Brooklyn—and how many people find their ways back from there?"

"If you had three times as many brains as you've got now, you'd still be a moron, third class," I snap at Hambone.

Just then two cops rush in, as excited as a pair of moppets with their first permanents.

"Hey, Hinkey," one says, "an old dame found a corpse out on the Bronx River Road. It looks like murder."

"No kiddin'," I says in the extract, then do a double take. "What did you say?" Then I grab my hat and take off. "Hambone, hurry up!" I screech, and see he is already in the prowl car, puffing like a donkey engine.

"Murder," Noonan repeats as we shoot through Woodlawn. "It is about time we got a break."

THE blitz wagon finally rolls to a stop in front of an empty lot a block from an apartment house. It is covered with old dry grass and weeds and an old shed. Next to the shed we see a group of gawking natives. Noonan flashes his badge and chases them away.

Then we get a gander at the defunct citizen. The appraiser of the violently removed is already checking on rigor mortis, and finally he announces that the corpse has been that way for about thirty-six hours or more.

The remains are those of a male of approximately fifty years. His noggin is the shape of a light bulb and he has a little mustache and a stringy goatee. The clothes he wears are of a very sombre color. He has been punctured twice by Roscoe pellets.

"They got him up close," the medical examiner says. "Especially the one through the neck. . . . Well, what's this?" He picks something up from the ground near the defunct one's nose and it is not a jelly bean.

"A bullet. Thirty-eight. Yeah, he has false choppers. The slug went into his mouth from the back and it bounced off his upper plate and then out of his mouth," the M.E. says. "Now if we only had the gun."

"Yeah, an' the murderer's name an' address," Hambone sniffs. "Now that you've told us legal he is dead and for how long, git lost. Let's look for identification, Alvin."

We find an old wallet in the defunct's coat, but if he'd had any scratch the assassins snitched it. There are some old notes that do not mean anything to us, and a card rubber-stamped:

Asaph Pentecost, President
The Benevolent Society of the Good
Shepherd

"For cryin' out loud!" Hambone says. "He must've been on the lam."

"This is no place for levity," I says. "Huh, the address is East Houston

Street. It may be out of our jurish-prudence, Hambone, but let's go anyway. The victim was brought here by auto and shot and dumped. You bring the bullet which is Exhibit A."

"Who enjoys senior authority here?" Noonan yips. "I give the orders, Buster."

AFTER the big slob gives the meat wagon orders to remove the cadaver, we go down to the address of The Benevolent Society of the Good Shepherd. The B.S.O.G.S. is right over a pawnbroker's office. We go up a flight of creaky steps and knock on a door that has a frosted panel.

A gravelly voice says to come in and we do. A medium-sized character wearing a mustard-colored baggy suit rubs his palms together and inquires if we are relatives of a recently departed member of the flock.

"I don't get it," Noonan snorts. "We are cops, junior, and are here to ask if you knew who knocked off Asaph Pentecost and why?"

"Asaph? You mean he—he was murdered?"

"He wasn't given a day at the stadium," I says. "Who are you?"

"I am his partner and vice president, Jonathan Migg," the character says, and if he is not quite surprised at the news, then John Barrymore never trod a board.

I take a fast look at the layout. It is about twelve by fourteen and has only a desk, two chairs, and a rag rug on the floor. On the wall is a big picture of an old shepherd in a kimono too big for him, and all around him is sheep.

"A nice place to come if you can't sleep," I quip. "There must be a thousand legs of mutton there. All right, Migg, when did you see Asaph last?"

"Three days ago," the character says, sitting down. "Said he had a business deal to look after."

"Er—what is the nature of this business?" I ask Migg.

"A noble one, my friend," the guy

says. "We have many lost lambs in such a big city and once they belonged to relatives which loved them. How many of them die in obscurity and go to Potter's Field?"

"I wouldn't know," Noonan snorts. "Leave us stop kiddin'. You wanted to be president so you knocked off your partner."

"Let's hear more, Hambone," I cut in.

"We visit the havens of the hopeless," Migg continues, and I look around for flying bats. "When one passes away we seek a link between the departed and those he might have left behind, and then if no relatives turn up we liquidate what small assets they might possess and see that they get a decent burial. Sometimes, of course, they leave nothing of even small value and so—"

"We're gettin' a buggy ride, Alvin," Noonan interrupts. "This snook is either cagey or as nutty as a pecan roll. Let's take him in."

"Mr. Migg," I says, trying to be quite calm about it all, "just a little while ago we found Asaph Pentecost in an empty lot, and not Potter's field. He had been ventilated quite permanently by a Betsy."

"He was-er-quite mysterious when I saw him last," the vice president tells us. "It is all I know, s' help me. I shall devote the rest of my life to finding his murderer!"

"Stop hammin' it up," Noonan sniffs. "Where did Asaph hive up, Migg?"

"In the back room," the citizen replies, and we all go in there.

It is a living room, kitchen, and dining room, all in one unit; old clothes, including hats and shoes, are piled on a table in the corner. Near it is an old rusty safe.

"You got the combo of that tin can?" Hambone asks Migg, and stabs a finger at the not-so-strong box. "Somethin' tells me, Alvin, we should see what is inside whicht might be a motive."

"If you insist," Migg says, and

kneels down and works the dial.

The door opens and he takes out a cigar box and puts it on a table. I open it and there is about a dozen old watches in it. Also some cuff links, a stickpin or two, and a gold locket.

"It is some of the stuff we found on the persons who strayed and passed away unwept an' unsung," Migg explains.

"You'll git a chancet to sing, pal," Noonan says severely. "Who gives you the right to brief corpses in the flea-bags anyways? That is illegal, Alvin, an' even I know that."

"It is if you want to be technical," Migg snorts. "We made the rounds every day, mostly on the Bowery, to see if any lost lamb had succumbed. We had a—well, sort of agreement with the proprietors of the—"

"Where is your take in this rack—er—enterprise?" I ask bluntly.

"P-Puhlease," Jonathan Migg says aghast. "We were supported by contributions. We canvassed the-er-taverns and passed the plate. Our brothers are generous."

HAMBONE NOONAN sits down, takes off his derby and massages his pate. I don't blame him as I am quite sure no screwier setup ever came to the attention of the gendarmes.

"Alvin," Hambone explodes, "I got it! This Asaph finally run onto a stiff that was hidin' out from the cops. He had a payroll or a sparkler stashed on him when he hired a place to flop. He got that coroner's strombosis or somethin' an' never woke up. This character is crossin'—I mean he crossed Migg here an'—"

"How dare you?" Jonathan Migg resents, and draws himself up to his full height which isn't much. "I happened to have been on the last case with Asaph at the Hotel Eureka. Ah, it was such a sad case! Me and Asaph was sure that at one time the corpse was a man of some means. He had nothing on him but an old Sunday school button and a broken tie clasp.

We brought his topcoat here if you want to have proof."

"What was his name?" I ask.

Migg shrugs. "Who knows? When they sink to the dregs they throw their names away, to save loved ones from disgrace. There were initials in the coat. Wait, I'll get it."

The character goes over to the table and picks up an old gray coat from the top of the pile. "Worn out at the sleeves now," he says. "But anybody that knows material . . . even though it's threadbare you can see in spots that—"

"Let's have it," Hambone says. "Yeah, his initials inside, Alvin. The label is frazzled but it was once silk. Huh, J.T.C. Where is the stiff now?"

"In the morgue, of course," Migg says. "If nobody claims him he goes to Potter's Field. Asaph wanted to prevent it and most likely that was the errand he was on when foul play overtook him."

I keep juggling three letters of the alphabet inside my buzzing noggin. *J.T.C. No, Alvin, it couldn't be. That is not Jud Crater over in the morgue, so stop being silly, I tell myself.*

"L-look, Migg," I says, "You was with Asaph Pentecost all the time he was briefing the flophouse casualty?"

"Oh, I might've stepped outside to talk to Minnie," Migg says. "She is the dame who runs the Eureka."

I get up as I want to get out of the spooky joint. "We are from police headquarters uptown," I says. "We will take that coat if you don't mind as we may be able to help loved ones identify a tenant of the deep freeze. Have you some wrapping paper?"

"Of course," Jonathan Migg says. "Asaph will never forget you."

"I do not intend to go where he is to make sure," I says. "Noonan, we must look at the remains of J.T.C. at the morgue. It is imperative."

"What could you expect it to be like after all this time?" Hambone sniffs. "I still think we should make an arrest, Alvin."

"Migg won't leave town," I says.

We go to the stiff warehouse and look at an item occupying a certain drawer. I am quite sure at first sight that he was never J. T. Crater, but to make sure we make notes of all the departed's specifications. I remembered that when the former D.A. used to laugh he flashed some gold dental fixtures. This stiff has only cement fillings. After the harrowing visit, me and Hambone hie to a tavern, as who wouldn't?

"Look," I says to the snook, "does-n't the initials J.T.C. mean anythin' to you? This coat we have got here could have been—why, we forgot to look inside the inside pocket. Most always a swank tailor sews his trade mark in there. I'll unwrap it."

Noonan still looks stupid while I examine the beat-up topcoat. I sweat ice-cubes when I get a gander at a tailor's label. Wertzels, Fifth Avenue, New York. I make Hambone look at it.

"Awright," I says. "They would know who they made this expensive burlap for. An' I'll bet it was for Jud Crater."

Hambone's last swallow of rye backfires. He nearly strangles. When he comes out of the fit he ogles me like a fish swimming in a bowl.

"Say that again, Alvin," he chokes out.

"J.T.C.," I says. "Jud Crater. When we're sure this rag belonged to him, we'll go down an' see the big D.A. Hambone, we've fell into somethin'! It scares me."

WE SPARE no horses getting to the high class sartorial emporium uptown. A citizen who makes most men of distinction look like Bowery bums inspects the old topcoat gingerly and admits that it was made for the late Judson T. Crater. Hambone Noonan takes off his derby and fans himself. Inside me butterflies are holding an air meet.

Finally I choke out, "Come on, H-Hambone."

We finally get to the D.A. in the

city's main bastille. We show him the coat with the initials and tell him what we have done since leaving the side of the corpse uptown. The prosecutor sends out for aspirin and spirits of ammonia.

"All right," the D.A. says after first aid, "what do you make of it, boys?"

"This is the way I figure it," I gulp out. "The character who last wore that burlap could've been the one that knocked off Jud Crater. After rubbing out the ex-D.A. he took a fancy to the coat. He figured maybe the citizen who hired him would make sure nobody was left to talk so he left town. Well, he strayed far from the old flock, as Asaph Pentecost might've said, and finally came back, a bum. He got a room in a flophouse and his ticker threw a driving rod. You follow me, D.A.?"

"I have to, Hinkey."

"Well, seeing that he didn't have much time to live, he became penitent over his awful crime, so he wrote a confession maybe," I says. "It couldn't have been the evidence Jud Crater was working on when he disappeared as that would've been turned over long ago to the big guy who hired the killer. Asaph, I bet, found something in the flophouse and did not let Migg in on it. Which means that he had something worth a bunch of moola. The bum who wore that crummy coat didn't have time to mail the letter to the cops."

The D.A. puts a burning cigar into his vest pocket and then tries to light a fountain pen. Noonan paws at his silly pan.

"Asaph must've found out who the killer of Jud Crater was. He turned black sheep, that shepherd, and tried blackmail, but wasn't smart enough to get away with it."

"Hinkey," the D.A. sighs, taking another aspirin, "what would you suggest? I am crazy to go along with this, but if I ever got in on solving the Jud Crater case I'd win the governorship in a walk."

"This is the way I figure it," I says. "It is a shot in the dark, but what can we lose? I figure it had to be a confession to unburden a soul, so I will call a certain party and tell him he's not as smart as he st-thinks, that a lost lamb wanted to make sure he would atone and so wrote two letters, so's one would be sure to reach the right authorities."

"May I make a guess who you're goin' to call, Alvin?" Noonan sneers.

The D.A. stares at me. "You don't mean—No, Hinkey, not Harlow Brink. He's running for senator next election."

"We will get to the bridge before we cross it," I says. "If I get an appointment with this character, I want to be sure of one thing. Protection, D.A. Lots of cops to cover me. I shall find out if Asaph tried to put the bite on the certain party. I'll leave you know when the tryst comes off."

"I know I shall have nothin' to do with such fiddle-faddle," Hambone says. "All this on account of a bum's topcoat."

"We shall see," I says.

I leave the bastille and walk uptown for five blocks and finally enter a tavern where I consult a phone directory. I drop a nickel and dial a certain number and soon a dulcet-voiced doll answers. I ask for the big shot. She asks me why I'm asking.

"Look, sister," I says in a creepy voice, "tell the big guy I know who left a corpse up on the Bronx River Road. Just tell him that, dreamboat."

"I'll connect you with Mr. Brink," the babe chokes out.

I wait. Then a very rough voice says, "Brink speaking. Who is this?"

"Ha, ha," I laugh silkily. "Just a friend of the late Asaph Pentecost. What did you do to my good friend, eh? Now I have to do what he failed to do, and maybe I will raise the ante. Oh, of course, there were two confessions, my friend, and if you think I'm bluffin', read the papers tomorrow. Yes, indeed. Oh my, first it was that poor man who checked on

your registered voters, then District Attorney Crater, then poor Asaph."

THERE is a very long silence at the other end of the wire. It is louder than thunder overhead. Then Brink says, "I see. Come to my apartment at eight tonight." He tells me the address. "Alone, understand?"

"Of course," I says softly. "And have about twenty-five G's."

"What?"

"Or read the papers tomorrow, my friend," I says.

"All right," Brink says. "I'll expect you."

I shake like a hula dancer caught in a blizzard as I make my way back to the D.A.'s office. He eyes me askance.

"My hunch was right," I says. "The gee was scared out of his shorts. Yeah, Harlow Brink. Put this address down quick, D.A., so's you won't forget it. Surround the joint just after eight o'clock." I give him the location.

"Yeah." The D.A. scribbles it on a pad. "We're checking the prints taken off the corpse at the morgue, Hinkey, the one that passed out at the flophouse. He might have a record."

Two hours later we learn that the stiff who had worn Jud Crater's topcoat was none other than Benny Kouf, better known as the Bronx Blaster, who had had a record as long as an Eskimo winter. The rough character had specialized in homicide to order.

"This is colossal, Alvin," the D.A. says. "We are on the edge of greatness."

"I will be on the brink of infinity if the cops don't take care of me," I says. "And Asaph Pentecost won't be around to notify my next of kin."

"It is incredible, Hinkey. You could pick up a string and reel it in and find a little wagon of emeralds and rubies on the other end."

I look at the clock. It is already six forty-five. "Well, I'm off," I says.

"That is what I'm afraid of—er—I mean good luck, Alvin. We can't af-

ford to lose you, so bear that in mind."

"I'd rather *you* did," I says.

At eight o'clock, shaking like a primary school sprout beginning his first recitation, I poke the bell of Brink's apartment. The big citizen admits me, his baggy face quite milky, and thumbs me toward a chair.

"All right, whoever you are," he says. "If you've got that evidence, let me see it."

"Do I look as big a sucker as Asaph?" I sniff. "Where's the twenty-five G's, pal? And I have friends outside who will notify the cops if I'm not out of here in twenty minutes. So rub me out and see what happens."

"I see," Brink says, and takes a good gander at me. "An associate of mine is on his way here with the money. How about a drink, my black-mailing friend?"

"I hate mickeys," I says. "Flattery won't get you nowhere either."

BRINK takes a snort. Five minutes go by and I feel quite secure. I tell myself there must be thirty cops closing in on the pueblo.

"Yeah," Brink says, "there's a chance I could beat a rap, and that the confession wouldn't hold up, as a crook wrote it. Maybe a revenge motive, my lawyer'd say. The jury wouldn't even figure Bennie Kouf could tell the truth even starin' an angel in the puss. But there'd be an investigation again and it would ruin my chances for becoming a senator. So I got to do business. Yeah, I was hasty about that partner of yours."

From somewhere in back four rough-looking hoods enter the living room.

"Lay off the rods," Brink says. "I have to make a deal with this character. Spot any strangers outside?"

"We cased the neighborhood for four blocks, boss, a rough citizen says. 'Not a sign of anybody we don't know.'"

"What?" I check myself, and feel cold fish swimming up and down my spine.

Then a little hood jumps toward me and scrutinizes my physiognomy. His eyes pop and his weak chin drops.

"Boss, what is this?" he yelps. "This is no ordinary taxpayer. It's a flatfoot and his name is Hinkey. I saw him in court about six months ago. Him and a dick named Noonan generally team up."

"Frisk him an' fast!" Brink roars.

Three Roscoes are pointed at me, so I don't go for mine. The cops will take over in a few minutes, I tell myself. But why didn't the hoods spot them? *Don't dare think, Alvin! You'll drop dead*, I say to myself.

The crooks hand Harlow Brink my wallet with my name and badge in it. The big operator starts grinning.

"Look, Hinkey, here is the way I figure it," he says. "There is nobody with you. Somehow you got the dope on that old rubout of J. T. Crater. You figured to get a bundle of dough from me which would be a confession, and then you'd throw a gun on me and take me in. You're in this alone so that you can get all the credit. Hah, you want to be a police inspector. I want to be a senator. Ambition is a bad thing sometimes, isn't it, Hinkey?"

"I tell you the cops have surrounded this point," I yelp. "You haven't a chance, Brink."

Brink turns away and grins at his torpedoes. "Looks like you got another nasty job, boys, so start matching for it," he says. "You're out, Pinky, as you've bagged your limit."

It is quite hard to understand such cold-blooded citizens.

"Another job for Mike, ha?" a gee asks. "The union'll get after him yet for makin' concrete blocks without payin' dues."

"Hinkey," Harlow Brink says, "you are going to be the first man to know what became of District Attorney Crater." He sits down and lights a big cigar. "I don't know how you connected me with that stiff in the empty lot up in Fleetwood, and then tied it in with Crater's rubout, but it

doesn't matter. You did, and so I must protect my good name. Nice try, knucklehead."

By this time I'm going out of my mind. *Where are the cops? D.A., how could you do this to me? Noonan talked you into it, that's what. Be calm, Alvin, and figure this one out.*

The criminal persons start matching quarters, and a fishy-eyed little runt finally exclaims triumphantly, "I win, pals. Better luck next time. Where do I knock the flatfoot off, boss?"

"Now we must make this airtight," Brink says like he is just starting a political speech to his constituents. "Can't leave any loose ends, Frankie. As clean a job as the one Benny the Blaster did on that D.A. There was a master! I never thought he'd ever repent for anything. Pour me a drink while I think the matter over."

I TAKE a fast inventory of my chances of cheating the bony gent with the scythe. They are as good as Joe Stalin's hopes of becoming an engineer on the Freedom Train. I take a quick look at Brink and wonder why he has worry dew beads on his brow. He is fumbling inside his coat and suddenly he yelps, "I must've put it down somewhere, boys. Look around quick for the insulin bottle."

"Yeah, step on it, Pinky," the runt yelps, "or the boss'll go in a coma."

I look around, too. And then I spot the apothecary's bottle on the table right beside me and grab for it.

Brink howls, "Give it here, you flatfoot!" and turns as pale as restaurant milk. "Shoot him, you mugs!"

"Go ahead!" I shout desperately, "and out the window this instillin goes before I let loose the death rattle."

Harlow Brink flops onto a divan and he is not faking. Three of the hoods rush to their meal ticket, and the character called Pinky comes at me like a Michigan blocker, trying to take me by surprise. I come up out of the chair with very nice timing

and butt him in the stomach, and he loses all the ozone in his bellows along with a Roscoe.

I retrieve the persuader near the window and push a mahogany table over just as the bullets start flying. One takes a lock of my tresses, but the others chunk into the mahogany, which must be five inches thick.

"Awright, you punks," I yip, "I can hold you off until dawn." I pick up a heavy vase and flip it over my shoulder. It goes out the big window and down into the street. I shoot Pinky in the shin as he rushes, and he yelps like a screech owl. I heave a statuette of Lady Godiva out.

"What'll we do, guys?" a hysterical hood howls. "I hear a cop's whistle an' somebody is hammerin' on the door. Let's lam out of here."

"Don't leave me, boys," Pinky entreats, "I can't walk."

"We'll send you a good book," a rat says.

Pinky questions if his pals had parents as they desert the joint. Citizens and cops break the door in, and one cop has a lump on his dome as big as an avocado. He carries the statuette of Lady Godiva.

"Where is the joker that tagged me with this thing? I'll murder the rat!"

"I did it," I says, and show him my badge. "I had to call the gendarmes in some way. Arrest these two gees for murder. I'll explain later. Brink said Pinky had bagged his limit—so it must have been him that rubbed out Asaph. Grab that hood's Roscoe!"

"Look, Hinkey," a cop yelps, "this is Harlow Brink and he looks dead."

"He's in a coma from not gettin' his instillin," I gulp out. "I was saved by diabetes."

"Who? I don't see no foreigners here?"

Suddenly there is a commotion outside. In comes three plainclothes characters, including Hambone Noonan, and four cops.

"Well," I says disdainfully. "Thanks for comin'. You made a detour around Peekskill, huh?"

"Alvin, you knucklehead!" Hambone says. "You give us the wrong address an' so we switched it around an'—"

"Well," I says, fighting off a faint myself, "who don't make mistakes? But we have solved the Jud Crater rubout. I mean I did. If that big shot and his pals get the rotisserie for knocking off Asaph, what can they lose confessin' they slew the ex-D.A.? I am sure I have the Betsy that was used in the rubout of the befriender of Bowery bums."

"Git me to a croaker," Pinky snarls. "An' leave me turn State's evidence before the other punks do. Yeah, that is the Roscoe I used on that geezer. Brink got it for me. In this joint somewhere he has a dozen other gats. He only hands them out when there's a job to do."

We call in an M.D. to revive Harlow Brink so that he can get another shock. At midnight we have him in custody downtown along with Pinky, who has told the cops where they can find the rest of Brink's mob. We show Brink the gun and the topcoat that belonged to Jud Crater, which was taken off the person of the ex-D.A.'s assassin.

"Git me a lawyer!" Brink yelps. "An' some more insulin."

"I bet that stuff won't save you from the shocks they hand out up the river," I says relentlessly. "Anyway, Pinky has sung and they can't burn you any worst for two rubouts than one, Brink. Leave us have the Jud Crater story, as what will you lose?"

Brink mops his pan and groans. "Awright, what is the use?" he says.

It seems that a spotter from an opposition party was on the point of exposing three hundred unqualified voters, most of whom had been defunct for ten years, in Brink's district. The spotter was rubbed out but not before he'd put up a fuss, and the next day a citizen found something the cops had overlooked, a letter one of the attackers had dropped, and written on Brink Real Estate, etc., stationery.

"Yeah, I had four of my boys covering the spot after the job was done," Brink says, "to see if the flat-feet should pick up anything. Benny Kouf saw the D.A. go to a citizen's apartment and he called me quick. I said for him to tail Crater and slug him but good and see what he had. Benny caught up with him before he could get to a subway. Later we put Crater in a concrete block and heaved him in the river. Anything else you want to know, you dumb cops?"

"Look who thinks he's smart," I sniff.

"All right, Hinkey," the D.A. says, "hurry out there as the photographers are waiting. There's no telling how far you'll go, Alvin."

"I could tell him just where and how far," Noonan says, full of sour grapes.

"Sure," I says, "look what happened last November, Hambone. But I can't play a piano yet."

So you see there is no such a thing as a perfect crime.

LAUGH WITH MURDER

So many readers enjoy the special brand of humor Author Joe Archibald puts into his murder mysteries, we want to inform them where they can meet another pair of zany homicide hooligans. Snooty Piper and Scoop Binney, newshawks extraordinary, appear in each issue of

TEN DETECTIVE ACES

The Devil's Vineyard

By Margaret Rice



For the first time in his checkered career, Joe Holliday found himself in the grape country. He came, not to sample wine—but to buy a few shares of death.

JOE HOLLIDAY was enjoying a snooze when someone knocked at the door. His ears, long trained for customers, caught the sound and quickly he swung his long legs off the desk. When the client entered, the detective's hawk face was hidden in papers.

"Oh," greeted Joe, showing sur-

prise. "Come in, please. Sit down."

The customer, a fat guy with an excited oily face, gratefully hit the chair. The guy had limpid brown eyes, plump round features and a very natty blue striped suit. There was a diamond in his tiepin and a couple of rings sporting same on the sausage fingers.

"It is terrible!" moaned the guy. "It is awful!"

"Tell me more," invited Joe. "And get specific." He was feeling good. Nobody was suing him and the finance company had received a payment.

"Do you like grapes?" asked the guy, his features becoming intense.

"Crazy about them," returned Joe. "But in my job, I run more into lemons."

He stopped getting clever and settled down to detecting. Fear and confusion were eating hard on the client.

"Someone," confided the guy, "is stealing papa's grapes. The old man must have his bunch for breakfast. Almost all the grapes are gone and I don't know what to do. It is I, Alfred Costello, who is appointed custodian of the master grapes! I have failed to guard them!" He bent close as he continued. "These are the grapes from whence our empire grew. Today, we Costellos are millionaires because of that vine!"

"Costello Vineyards," breathed Joe. The family was one of the richest in California. Around Lodi, the grape center, they were considered kings. He was a very fortunate gumshoe.

"Listen," said Alfred, "I am old-fashioned and do not know about detectives and such. My sons are Stanford University but I am not. They laugh at me, but I and papa made the money to buy them manners. Hiring you is like going to the dentist. It does not make me happy. Do you understand?"

JOE did, and he liked the guy. Alfred was strictly old-world and, in a way, a greater gentleman than Stanford could make of his sons.

"I'll take the case," he said. "Now what do you want me to do?"

"Find who steals the grapes. I know it is no insect or blight! I know grapes. The fruit has been plucked by human hands. For what purpose? To throw me into disfavor with papa. Ah, papa is old, but his veins have hot temper."

"Okay," concluded Joe, "I'll take it, veins and all."

"Papa will disinherit me if he gets mad," continued Alfred Costello. "He changes the will about such little things—Maria wearing nail polish and Tony getting jailed for speeding. To lose the grapes would kill me. I love the grapes, and papa, too, but he is not always fair. Every time I climb the ladder, I get a terrible dizzy spell but I do it for papa."

The speech hit Joe. "East Lynn next week," he mused. "But this has my sympathy." He dug harder with, "Who will benefit if you are disinherited?"

"My brother Nick, and then all the kids. That Nick don't know nothing about grapes. You come with me now. You must pretend to be somebody else. We must be like foxes. You will be Mr. Jones, an advertising man. The sons and nephews plead with me to be advertising. But I tell them, Costello Wines are quality and need no words in papers. It is true. Ah, the young ones learn much of business but it is the old who made the business."

Joe snatched his hat off the desk and announced, "Come, we will find the thief!"

"Ah," sighed Alfred, "I feel happy now." He mopped his big brow with a silk handkerchief.

Joe said, "The fee is one hundred a day plus expenses."

He said it for fun but Alfred answered, "It is good of you to come for that. It is my honor at stake as guardian of the grapes."

Joe mopped his forehead with a two-bit shred of cotton and said, "I will work for fifty bucks a day and

that is good for me and my honor."

They drove to the vicinity of Lodi, the city of the grapes. Alfred had a neat white delivery truck that ate up the highway. It was hellish hot but Joe reflected, "It is good for grapes, and what's good enough for them is okay for me."

THE vineyard was magnificent. Joe could hardly believe it. The white sprawling ranch house was Italian villa. The sight of miles and miles of vines trained to make millions of bucks awed him. He even got beyond value and simply enjoyed the scenery. He stared at a hillside of olive groves that were like a silver sheen in the sunlight.

"Lola, my sister-in-law," said Alfred, "likes olives in her martinis so my brother Nick grew her some. Me, I am old-fashioned. If my dead wife had wanted such, I would have beaten her. She was an angel, that lady. This Lola makes trouble in a nice way."

"What do you mean?" asked Joe.

"She is so polite about it. But the knife in the back digs just as deep."

They parked the truck in the big garage and entered the house through the kitchen. Two cooks were busy. Joe inhaled esthetic odors of onions, garlic and wonderful things. "Hi," greeted Alfred and the cooks beamed back.

Alfred led the way through a maze of richly furnished halls to a magnificent sunroom. In a wheel chair sat the giant.

It was like seeing an elaborate old painting. Joe stared at the patriarch. The human race didn't make them like this any more—not almost seven feet tall and with talon features bearing such dignity, labor and strength. The brown eyes were sightless but Joe knew they had a seeing power.

"Papa," said Alfred, "I have brought an advertising man. You felt we should see one."

The patriarch wiped his mouth and sighed as he answered, "In the old days we just grew grapes and made the best in wines. Lola thinks it would

be wise—she is a smart one. I hear, on the radio, these advertisings but they make me mad. I do not care about the hair tonics as I have no hair and it does not matter to one old like I. Nor does the washing soaps mean much. My sainted dead wife might have found concern about it. She scrubbed the clothes by beating them on the river rocks with the soap she made. Yet Lola shows wisdom."

JOE wondered about Lola. The gal seemed to throw weight in these parts. She'd have a good motive to get Alfred disinherited so her husband Nick would get the vineyard.

"Tell me about advertising!" the old man suddenly roared.

Joe, caught short, asked, "All of it, or do you want it easy?"

The patriarch bellowed with laughter. He said, "I like this guy, Alfred. He does not make big, fast talk. He sounds like a kind of pirate too. Hah, I have been a pirate."

Then the man entered—raw, thin and blond, with a steel slit for a mouth and cold blue eyes like dormant acid.

"You sent for me, Mr. Costello?" he said in a frigid voice. He wore jeans and a white shirt.

Joe saw this was no relative or office worker. The guy was tough as timber and knew his job, whether it be grapes, horses or bumming.

"Credo!" cried the patriarch. "Indeed I did. There were no master grapes for my breakfast. I sent for Alfred but was told he was gone. I wanted you to cut a cluster for me. Only you and Alfred know best how to tend the vine. You have the same technique even to cutting a cluster."

"I was in Lodi with a champagne shipment," replied Credo, "so I didn't come sooner. Just got back."

"Alfred is here now," said the pirate. "He can get the grapes." Credo cast them all a curt look and left.

Alfred's brown eyes popped as though he had certainly realized some-

thing. He winked at Joe and looked very happy as he hurried out of the room.

"This advertising," said the old man. "Maybe we will need it. The kids don't know the grapes. Only Alfred and Credo could handle the job. Nick could if he would but he won't. Hah, I talk of my sons but I love them. I talk of the grapes and I love them more!"

"Papa," cooed a voice.

A tigress came into the room. Joe had never seen a tigress before—not one that was personified into a human being. Lola Costello was something—she was big as a burlesque queen, had dynamic blue eyes, yellow hair and was packed perfectly into blue satin. She would destroy but not without a tremendous motive. "A dangerous dame," Joe appraised her. Maybe she loved her husband so much that she'd try to discredit Alfred.

"Can I visit with you, papa?" she asked. "That Nick is too busy working."

Papa sighed as he said, "It is too bad you have only me to visit with—a dying old man who will not die for many, many years. Sit down and I will tell you all about how I was a pirate." Then he said to Joe, "Mr. Jones, will you please find Alfred? He has been gone far too long and I want my grapes."

"Sure," replied Joe. "But where is the master vine?"

"I like you," commented the patriarch. "Don't you, Lola? He doesn't talk *business trend* or *economic swing* like the college boys. Hah, they would give me gray hair if I had my hair. The vine is by the marble fountain on the patio. You can go out this door."

Joe ambled out of the room. He found the fountain that was an elegant hunk of sculpture. But he didn't enjoy the scenery. There was a tall ladder and there at the foot of it was Alfred—dead! Joe checked carefully. Evidently, Alfred had climbed the ladder, had the dizzy spell about which

he had spoken, and had fallen, crushing his head on the rough stones.

Joe thought of the old man who had worked so hard. He looked around for some grapes but couldn't find any. Every single cluster had been cut on the master vine. He ambled along an avenue until he reached the main yard. He broke off the biggest and best cluster he could find. Slowly he returned to the house. He felt like hell. Alfred had been a good guy.

THE pirate was spinning tales. Lola was interested but not too much. She was like a radio announcer waiting to plug a product—Nick.

"Grapes," said Joe.

The old man took them, tasted a few and spat out, "Not the master vine! These are fine but not the master. Where is that Alfred?"

Gently Joe told the truth. He tried to ease the shock.

"I do not understand," muttered the pirate. "Why should Alfred be dead? It is I who am sick, old..." The patriarch slumped, weeping.

Joe took over. Lola was wonderful in emergency. She telephoned for a doctor and raced to find Nick. Joe wheeled the old man into his bedroom and laid him on the bed.

"Phone Tobby," cried the old man. "The will must be changed back! My sons and the grapes—it is my sons. Why did I make that secret new will last week? If Alfred died, everything would go to Credo because of the grapes. Credo knows the business."

Then Joe caught a movement at the open window. He eased across the floor but the figure had fled. Lola stood in the doorway staring at the old man. "You disinherited your own son for a stranger," she said slowly.

"I will change the will back," cried the patriarch. "Get Nick. Where is he?"

"He isn't in the house," she answered dully. "He must be in the storage house. I'll get him right away." She ran out of the room.

"Take it easy," suggested Joe.

"You're all right, pirate." He checked the pulse. The old man was okay.

"Call Toby," commanded the patriarch. "Hah, you called me *pirate*. I like that. Call Toby, Lido 475. The will must be changed back."

"Sure," said Joe, "I'll get Toby here fast. But you stop being excited."

He found the telephone in the adjoining room. It took ten minutes to get the call through.

"Alfred Costello just died in an accident," said Joe. "Mr. Costello has had a bad shock and is anxious to change the will he made last week."

There was an explosion on the part of Mr. Toby, who finally controlled himself, said, "I'll be there right away." The phone went dead.

Joe returned to the bedroom. The pirate was lying face down on his pillow. Joe raced to the bed. The old man was dead. Artificial respiration was no good but Joe was still trying when the doctor arrived.

"He was okay when I went to telephone," stated Joe. "I am sure he was." He couldn't believe it.

Then Nick, a nervous brown man with burning eyes, entered. He knelt by the bed and sobbed, "Papa!"

An excited, fat, red-faced guy came rushing into the room. He carried a brief case and it hit the floor when he saw the patriarch was dead.

"Oh me!" he cried. "This is terrible. I begged him not to change that will."

"All to Credo," said Lola. "I can't believe it."

Mr. Toby sat down. Weakly he said, "According to the new will, if Alfred died, Credo would inherit instead of Nick. On Credo's death, the estate reverts to Nick."

Lola sobbed. Nick quietly said, "I am not a grape expert. I would have maintained Credo in charge, though. Papa should have realized that. Papa did not love me—never has—he fought my art, my painting." He left the room.

LOLA faced them. She said, "Nick needs the money. I can get along without it but he can't. His art—you know he can't sell it. There is one thing to do, Mr. Toby, and we'll do it. Papa wouldn't have wanted it this way. You all know it. We'll break and smash that will."

"It is ironclad," said Mr. Toby. "I tried to argue with him. That will can never be broken."

"He changed his mind," pointed out Joe. "I can prove it. I am a witness."

The lawyer replied, "He provided against such things as a deathbed change. Maybe this Credo is a man of honor and will make a concession."

"Why should I?" came the bullet voice. Credo lounged in the doorway. He moved in. "I overheard what you've all been saying. I knocked with manners but it didn't do no good. I'll keep the deal and run the business like the old man wanted. Well, I came here a stumblebum and he gave me a job. I'll continue that job." He cut them a cast-iron glance and left.

"He doesn't get the house," mused Mr. Toby. "But the others won't be able to keep it up. In the end he'll get everything." Then he looked very startled as he added, "I mustn't be talking like this. Oh my, I have been very indiscreet. But it is just that I know the family so well. Alfred and Nick have been like sons to me."

Joe felt bad too. Well, he might as well go now but he didn't. Mr. Toby offered Joe a ride to town as soon as he could make funeral plans with Nick.

Nick stormed, "Do what you want. Ask Credo."

Joe was wretched. He had liked Alfred and the pirate. It was a hellish deal for the family. Too late the old man had gotten realistic about sons and grapes. Joe stared at the body on the bed. If he had remained in the room, he might have saved the old man. It was strange how the old man had smothered. There had been no weakness in that body nor a heart attack.

Then Joe figured. He was a detective and he went to work. In ten minutes someone could have smothered the pirate. Joe checked back for sounds. He had been so damned intent on getting the call through, he hadn't noticed anything.

He traced back. With a jolt he realized he hadn't found the grape thief. When Alfred had left the room, he had all indications of having found a clue to the thief. Joe remembered how Alfred's face had lit up. It must have been something the pirate had said. Joe got it now—the old man had stated only two men knew how to cut the master grapes properly—Alfred and Credo. Alfred must have known the thief was Credo.

JOE recalled that someone had been eavesdropping when the pirate told of the new will and how he wanted to change it. Lola and Nick didn't have any motive to kill the pirate. Lola had heard about the will and she would want the murdered man alive so he could change it. But Nick hadn't known about it. Credo had most to gain. "Too tough to prove," realized Joe. "Deduction isn't any good without facts. I'll operate on the theory that Credo was the eavesdropper and had a tremendous motive." Joe turned to Toby and asked, "How do the Costellos rate with the D.A. in Lodi?"

"Nick's best friend. The family is well liked and prominent in Lodi."

"Listen," said Joe, "you stick around."

The Costellos had political pull and for once it could be used for a good cause. Joe telephoned the D.A. and carefully explained the whole story. Credo was an outsider. The Costellos carried weight.

"I'm not trying to frame a man," stressed Joe, "but I believe this needs investigation."

The D.A. was very interested and promised to come immediately.

Joe spun a trap. Credo was a sharp guy and there was no evidence. The

D.A. was a nice young fellow with a cowlick and a big, hearty laugh.

The hot afternoon had turned to evening. After leaving the coolness of the villa, it was like entering a gateway to hell. Joe tried to look like a greedy, shiftless guy. He found Credo at the big vat. Cops shadowed.

"A new one," Credo was saying to a workman. "This one won't last much longer. When it goes, we'll lose wine and time."

Joe eased in until he got noticed.

"What is it?" demanded Credo.

"I saw something a while ago," said Joe. "I'd like to tell you about it. I was in the room next to Mr. Costello when he died."

Credo glared. "Beat it," he said to the workman. "I'll be at number nine in twenty minutes." Then he faced Joe.

The detective got a stare as cold as his own as he stated, "I saw what you did with the pillow. I am the kind of guy who will keep his trap shut for ten thousand bucks."

Surprise flashed into fear but so quickly it would have been missed if Joe hadn't been hepped.

"Blackmail!" uttered Credo with contempt.

"I am a low guy," admitted Joe.

"You're crazy," suddenly said Credo. "You have no proof."

"The D.A. in Lodi would listen," pointed out Joe. "The Costellos are solid there. You aren't. They'd like my story. Well, I won't tell it if you kick through."

Credo hesitated and then cried loudly, "Get out of here!" and went away, swinging his arms.

Joe met the D.A. at the house. "No bite," said Joe. "But he has something to think about. He might try something now."

TWENTY minutes later Nick came into the room. "At this time," he complained, "Roxie would have a colt! Hah, I should go. Better Credo, as he'll probably own even Roxie."

He stormed out of the house. "Now

he's excited," said Lola. "He loves Roxie, too." She hurried out.

Fifteen minutes later she returned. "It is Nick on the phone and he sounds so strange. He wants Mr. Jones." Joe followed her to the telephone. "Come," cried a man's shrill voice. "Meet me at the storage cellar in the vat shed. Don't tell Lola or anyone." The phone banged.

Joe knew this was zero hour. He knew it must be Credo and not Nick. His blood hit high as he left the house. It was a ten-minute walk to the shed that loomed huge in the night.

"And I'm doing this for free," he mused. The moonlight twisted in the vines, cast weird shadows. "I'm glad the D.A. is tailing along," he thought.

They had agreed on the signal. When he left the house, the cops who were watching from an upstairs window, would tail him. As they had hoped, Credo had made a move.

The faint nightlights in the shed didn't help much. The rows of tremendous casks made ugly giant blotches. There came a sound from far down the aisle. Joe moved along. When he reached the end, he had to feel his way into the black. There were no lights here but only shadows. The sound came clearly now and from below.

"Storage cellar." Joe remembered and looked for a stairway.

He made out a huge round hole in the floor and an iron ladder reaching downwards. It looked too damned no-good.

"I'll make Credo come up here," he declared. There was a small stool against the wall. He sat down and called, "Nick, where are you?"

"Put your hands up," came the frigid voice.

Joe jumped up. There was Credo with a gun in one hand and a burning white-hot brand in the other hand. The noise still sounded from below. "A bottle on a long cord swinging across the room," said Credo with a chuckle. "It makes a nice sound, huh?"

"You seem to want me down

there," remarked Joe. He was glad the cops were around. Credo was crazy.

"You will be down there," replied Credo. "Start moving. If I shoot, Nick is framed—his gun and fingerprints on it and he has no alibi. That Roxie giving birth to a colt business was a trick. Go on, get moving."

JOE backed up. He'd get Credo to confess now and the cops would step in. Sweat was pouring down his body.

"So you smothered the old man and now try to frame Nick. Did you push Alfred off the ladder?"

"Didn't push Alfred but when I saw him fall, it gave me the idea. I didn't plan to kill anyone when I cut the master grapes—just wanted to get Alfred in bad—it would have worked. I wanted more authority in the business. Then I heard the old man talking in the bedroom, about the new will leaving everything to me. Hell, it was my chance before he could change it. I smothered him fast while you phoned."

Joe was pleased. The cops should have everything recorded now. He wished they would come out of hiding. That gun, branding iron and Credo's killer's eyes gave him chills.

Credo started forward. He was saying, "Don't look so happy. I saw the D.A. at the house. He got a phone call about a murdered man being in the fire I set at the south pasture. When you left the house, the D.A. and cops had been gone ten minutes. I watched you all careful. If you had seen him leave or if he had seen you, it would have been different. It would have changed everything." Then he laughed.

Joe's heart hit his shoes and his blood ran into ice. He inched backwards. He wondered if he could jump down the ladder in time but figured he couldn't. So he jumped backwards in a crazy broad jump. He hit the bricks solid and raw, but he was alive and

on the other side of the hole. The gun spat as he rolled into the shadows of a giant cask. He could see the killer coming with gun and iron.

Joe waited. He found a heavy wooden box and waited. Slowly Credo moved around the big hole. Then Joe raised the box and threw it with all his hope for life. There was a terrific scream and then loud, mad shrieking as Credo fell backwards into the pit.

Later, Joe climbed down the ladder.

Credo was dead. Joe got a nice reward. Lola insisted on that. She was so grateful that he had saved Nick's inheritance. Joe didn't refuse the thousand-buck check nor the case of champagne the family gave him.

As he rode back to town with Toby, he mused, "Champagne will spoil me for lesser things."

But he didn't have to worry about it. The car had a flat tire and there were twelve exploding bottles.

I Lost My Ghoulish Figure

By Joseph Commings

(Continued from page 20)

duds Peg Balriddel was wearing in the lunchroom, the time I met her."

The cop looked disparagingly at the lawyer. "We found these in the trunk compartment of Mrs. Laurent's car. Toting 'em around till she could bury 'em, I guess."

"It's ridiculous!" stormed the lawyer. "It's all a plant! Why should Mrs. Laurent want to kill this woman? She'd never seen her before in her life!"

"You're not that stupid," I said. I was tired and my nerves were in rags. "You want somebody to put it into words for you? Peg Balriddel came back to this town to see Riis so that they could blackmail Laurent together with that old prescription. Irene had known all about Peg Balriddel for some time. Laurent and Irene never had any secrets between them. She told me so. So Irene knew about Peg too.

"Irene overheard Peg's visit to Laurent in the afternoon Peg could ruin the Dean. Irene's whole social life and security were at stake. She didn't know that Peg had left the prescription with Riis for safekeeping. She killed Peg because she

thought she was getting herself out of jeopardy. She contacted Peg, got her up in the operating theatre, killed her, then slipped the body into the morgue. She forged Laurent's name on the dissection order. When I came in I would have cut up the body unbeknownst—only my weakness for blondes put the trap under Irene."

The lawyer and the cop were looking at me as if I'd made a political speech.

I added, "Now let me get some sleep." I stretched out where I was.

The cop watched the lawyer walk dejectedly out, then he turned back to me. "You're not going to sleep on that hard table, are you?"

"The way I feel, I could go to sleep in a bin of broken beer bottles."

I rolled over and buried my face in my crooked arm. One thought was knotting up my head. All these women had been older than I was. The older ones sure can lead a fellow a hell of a dance. I wondered if I'd be better off if I switched to bobby soxers.

I'd have to make some sort of a resolution tomorrow.

Hundreds of Clues

By Ray Cummings

It was a gripping moment at the opera. The orchestra was playing a crescendo, the tenor was singing his famous aria — while in his dressing room a man waited with brandished blade to ring down the curtain in blood.



PETER VANCE drew his thin figure up close to the dressing room wall, letting the curtain from the wardrobe closet partly conceal him.

The small room was dark. Vance had extinguished all the lights when he'd furtively slipped in here from the backstage corridor a few minutes ago. His every muscle was rigid.

The small door leading to the corridor was closed. Vance was standing so when it opened, he would be behind it. The dressing room had only one window. Its shade was up, with a glint of light slanting in from the alley outside behind the opera house—a glow that illumined the small littered room where Julio Perona's costumes were strewn about.

Like a shadowy statue, Vance stood stiff and tense. He was a smallish, dapper fellow, distinguished-looking with the thin black mustache and neatly trimmed goatee which he affected. His gloved hand gripping the knife dangled at his side. In the silence the music of the opera drifted here faintly. Only a few minutes now, and Perona would be here!

Vance knew the opera well. Tonight was the twin bill of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*; and the first act of *Pagliacci* was nearing its close. He could hear Canio's bursts of jealous rage mingled now with the turgid music. For an instant they

came loud and clear as Perona, singing the part of Canio, stood back in the wings while he watched his unfaithful wife with her lover.

Vance's heart was racing. This thing he had to do would be finished so soon now. Just a single knife thrust, here in the darkness, then he knew that in the confusion between the acts he could dart out the little door unseen. Now he could hear that Perona was alone on the stage, beginning the famous *Ridi Pagliaccio*.

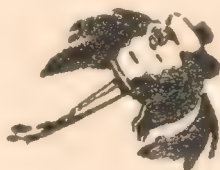
Caruso's greatest song.

But Julio Perona surely was a good second, raking in the money now because he was recognized as the greatest operatic tenor of his time. "*Laugh Clown, Laugh!*" Now Perona's

wild ironic laughter came floating through the door; then the curtain was down and the burst of applause sounded. Julio Perona would make his last curtain call in a moment.

IN THE dark dressing room Peter Vance was telling himself that he didn't want to do this thing; it was forced upon him. Vance was Perona's cousin. Also he was Perona's agent, concert manager and secretary.

Julio Perona, the true artist, always had been careless and impractical about money. Now suddenly, with some chance suspicion of his trusted cousin's embezzlement, he was looking into things. A fellow of fiery temperament, who would be so engulfed in furious anger that Vance would surely go to jail when the



truth came out. He had threatened that, just a few hours ago—the wreck of Vance's career. Even without jail, scandal would ruin him.

But with this single knife thrust he would be free to settle Perona's affairs in his own fashion. That and his inheritance from his wealthy cousin meant riches for life. To Peter Vance, there was no choice. . . .

Now the sound of a hand on the dressing room doorknob made the lurking Vance draw back further against the wall. The door opened. Perona came in, a rustling white blob in his clown costume. The door swung closed after him. The darkness of his dressing room was a surprise; he gave a low exclamation, headed for the switch at the side of his big make-up table.

Vance leaped. His knife blade darted at Perona's broad back. But he must have made some noise. The blow missed as Perona swung around sharply. Then Vance with a rush of horror realized that he and Perona were struggling.

Desperately Vance clung to the knife. He heard the tenor give a sharp cry of startled surprise, then anger. Vance struck again, frantically, as his adversary's bulk pressed him backward. The knife blade hit a glancing blow, into the fleshy part of Perona's shoulder. The stab brought from him a scream of pain and rage. His hand gripped Vance's wrist, his thick heavy body surging forward.

To Vance it was all a blur of horror. The small chair at the dressing table overturned and then both men went down, Perona flailing with his fists in the dimness, panting and cursing.

More than anything the scream struck terror into Vance. That, and this turmoil of fighting, would bring people from the corridor! Flooded with horror, still clinging to the knife, Vance managed to break away and leap to his feet.

He could see the white blob of the clown struggling up. And now there

was a shout outside the dressing room door!

Vance whirled and dashed to the door. He couldn't get out unseen now! Voices and milling footsteps were close outside in the corridor. A girl screamed.

VANCE had only time to snap the spring lock, fastening the door, then he whirled to meet Perona's rush. This time luck was with him. His knife stab sank deep and square into the broad, white-ruffled chest.

It was enough. As Vance let go the buried knife handle and squirmed sidewise, the big white blob before him seemed teetering on its buckling legs. A dying clown whose death scream turned to a horrible choked gurgle.

Then Perona fell, twitched and lay motionless, a grotesque white crumpled heap in the center of the dressing room floor, with the knife handle standing up like a little cross and a crimson stain spreading under it.

In that moment the panting Vance stood transfixed. Fists were pounding on the locked door. He was caught in here, with only the window into the alley offering escape.

"Julio! Julio! Open the door!" It was Johnson, the stage manager.

The doorknob was being rattled; fists beat a tattoo. A girl screamed hysterically, "He's being killed! Somebody's being killed!"

Then Vance's desperate terror mastered the blur of panic so that at least he could think clearly. He remembered his gray slouch hat which he had laid carefully on a chair in the corner. He snatched it up, jammed it on his head, rushed for the window. It was open wide at the bottom, this warm spring night. The alley was only about three feet down from the sill.

But the window was screened! He couldn't remove the screen; it seemed nailed permanently into the sash!

"Julio! Julio!" the stage manager was still calling frantically.

But now there was only silence in the dark little dressing room. At the window Vance had opened his pen-knife. Twice he slashed the screen, a long vertical cut, and one crossing its center horizontally.

He was about to bend the four triangles of screening outward, climb through the hole and drop into the alley when a new rush of horror flooded him. Out at the distant alley entrance men had appeared from the street, pedestrians, and then there was the bulky uniformed figure of a policeman with them!

They were plain in the glare of light from the street. They stood a second, then came running into the alley!

Vance knew then that he was trapped in here! There was only one thing he could do. The front of the alley had light-sheen on it, but the window here was in shadow.

Swiftly Vance bent the four big triangles of screening inward, the way they would be if he had cut the screen from outside and climbed into the room. Then he turned from the window. Those men with the policeman running into the alley would never be able to say that he had not been ahead of them!

In the darkness of the little room Vance stumbled noisily against the overturned chair. He cursed loudly, calling, "Julio! I heard you scream. What—"

As though he had just seen the body, he gave another cry of shocked horror. Then with the room lights switched on, he was at the dressing room door, flinging it open.

From the corridor Johnson surged in, with the chorus master behind him and a crowd of the girls and women of the chorus, gaudy in their peasant costumes, milling hysterically outside.

"Dead! He's dead!"

"Signor Perona, dead—murdered!"

"You, Vance. Why, why—"

It seemed then that Johnson and the chorus master would leap to seize Vance.

"I heard him scream! I cut the window and climbed in! Just a minute ago. He—he was lying there. . . ." Vance gasped it. Then he gasped something about the killer who must be here, and he shoved Johnson back so that now they were searching the big costume closet.

"We heard them fighting in here—" somebody gasped.

"Dios! Signor Perona — he is killed!"

FOR those first moments it was a babbling chaos, with Johnson and the chorus master standing dazed, stage hands and carpenters and electricians joining the hysterical women in the corridor. A girl seemed to have fainted. Somebody was calling for a doctor.

"The police!" Vance shouted. "Phone for the police! Keep out of here, you people! Johnson, get the women away!"

Outside the window, the men in the alley were shouting now. Then the policeman came in, with a couple of other men after him. He was a big cop; a young fellow, burly, freckled-faced, with a shock of bright red hair under his cap. He stood dazed; he gasped, "My Gawd!" glared at the body.

Then Vance had seized him. "I heard you behind me in the alley! I climbed in the window ahead of you!"

Half a dozen of them in a moment were trying to explain it all to the young cop. His name was McGinnis. He recovered from his shock in a moment.

"Hey, you women, get out of here!" He scattered the women at the door with uniformed authority.

"I'm Signor Perona's cousin," Vance explained. He was getting his wits now. The glances of suspicion at him were obvious. But so what?

"You cut that screen and came in from the alley?" McGinnis said.

"Yes. I'd gone out for a drink. I was coming back, heard the scream in here, dashed into the alley. I yelled but nobody answered me. I cut the screen, climbed in . . ."

How could anyone disprove it?

"The killer was in here," Johnson said. "We heard him."

And where was the killer now? Suddenly everybody was asking it or thinking it; and Vance couldn't miss that now the young cop was gazing at him with open mistrust.

"I heard the killer too," Vance said, "as I dashed up to the window. You must be mistaken, Johnson—he must have gotten out the door."

"And locked it on the inside?" McGinnis said. "How the devil could he?"

"It's a spring lock," Vance retorted calmly. "It locks when you close it." His confidence had come back to him now. "I'm Perona's manager," he added. "And his nearest relative, his cousin. I think we should wait for the police, not have all this turmoil."

"I'm the police," McGinnis said. "For now I'm in charge, not you."

"Suit yourself," Vance shrugged. With a faint smile on his thin saturnine face he stood against the wall watching this rookie cop so full of himself because for a minute or two he was in charge of a murder case.

And apparently it startled young McGinnis. He stood gazing at Vance. "You cut that window screen and climbed in," he said. "Maybe you did, maybe you didn't."

"Don't be a fool," Vance said mildly. He produced his penknife. "Here's my knife that cut it."

"Lemme see it."

McGinnis examined the blade. He nodded. "Okay, you did cut the screen. The screen paint from the screen is on this blade."

"Thanks," Vance retorted.

McGinnis had turned away. "You got gloved hands," he said. "Likely no fingerprints on the knife handle." He was muttering to himself. "If I had just one decent damn clue—"

But he wouldn't find any; how could he? Vance was at the door, ordering the women to move back farther; McGinnis was over at the window. The big triangles of the cut screen, projecting here into the room, seemed to fascinate him. He produced his flashlight. And suddenly he gave a low cry of triumph.

"One clue?" McGinnis gasped. "Why, look here, I got hundreds of 'em!"

THEN he had whirled back. Triumph was on his homely freckled face as he stood towering over Vance. "I sure got you—you rotten killer."

Vance held himself firm. It was a bluff this cop was trying to pull, of course. "What's on your mind now?" Vance demanded.

"Plenty! We got ten witnesses here saying no killer got out that door. You were in here—"

"Sure, after I cut the screen and climbed in. I was outside the window, down in the alley—"

"Were you?" McGinnis roared. "The devil you were! You cut the screen all right. Your knife-blade proves it. Come over here! Take a look at hundreds of clues that prove you weren't outside when you cut it!"

Now he was shoving Vance to the window. "You bent the big flaps of the cut screen inward," McGinnis was saying. "But if you'd been *outside* when you cut it, all the little cut ends of the wire would have been *inward* under the thrust of the blade. They're not. You can see—"

Now in the flashlight glare Vance saw how the little prongs of the cut wire, under his knife slash as he stood in the room, were all bending toward the alley!

"So there you are," McGinnis said. "Want to argue about it?"

The stricken Vance didn't. Mute, he stood staring. And curiously there was in his dazed mind only the vague thought that he hated this damn grinning cop.

The Corpse Gift

By Frank Taubes



It was like a nightmare, for Bill Chandler! Mysterious phone calls. . . a strange wallet . . . the bloody handkerchief. And he didn't know the worst visitation was yet to come.

PALE blue fluorescent light shone in the window of an office on the thirty-fifth floor of the Universal Building. The other windows in the building were dark, the office workers having gone home hours ago. In that dimly lit office the two partners of the law firm of Derringer and Chandler were holding a conference. One of the two partners was calm;

and self-confident; the other was obviously under strain, letting his restless fingers wander aimlessly over the desk blotter.

"Okay, so the guy will die," Sam Derringer said. "It's not the first time that a thing like that happened."

"It was my case," Bill Chandler answered, his restless fingers toying with the onyx inkwell at the edge of the desk.

"You really have nothing to kick about," Sam said. "One lost case isn't going to break the firm. And think of the fee."

"It was too circumstantial," Bill said.

"Now that's a hell of a note," Sam answered mockingly. "Of course the evidence was circumstantial. Everything's circumstantial as long as there weren't eyewitnesses. Is this a lesson in the principles and letter of the law?"

"We'll appeal the case."

"That's what we're getting paid for. But the appeal will be turned down. And our little homicidal client will go to the chair."

"It wouldn't be so bad if he weren't blaming me for it," Bill said. "He's blaming me for it, as if it were my fault I lost the case."

"Get a hold of yourself," Sam replied. "No matter how mad he gets, he's safely behind bars. I've never seen you act this way about a case."

Bill didn't answer. He looked nervously around the darkened office, trying to organize his own excited thoughts while listening to what his partner was saying.

"What's the matter with you anyway?" Sam said.

"Nothing, nothing."

"Ever since the trial you haven't been the same. You've been working too hard."

"Maybe so."

"You ought to take a vacation," Sam said.

THERE was no doubt about it, Bill thought, he was working too hard. As soon as the appeal was over he and June would take a trip, a skiing trip up to Maine as they had done on their honeymoon. God, how he longed for those leisure times. Why did this thing have to haunt him? He had to think. There was so much to think out.

"There's nothing troubling you, is there, Bill?"

Bill started. Had something aroused Sam's suspicion?

"Nothing, Sam. I'm all right." He'd have to be careful. He could let no one suspect. Not even Sam.

"Because if anything's the matter, you know you can rely on me."

"Thanks, Sam."

"Well, I'll be running along, Bill. And don't you worry about our little fat client. He's just another case."

"A circumstantial case," Bill said almost to himself.

"Don't let it get you down," Sam said. He patted Bill on the back and smiled patronizingly. "Get a good night's sleep. I bet you'll feel like a million bucks tomorrow."

Bill watched Sam pick his coat off the rack and leave through the streamlined glass door. He waited until he could hear the steps fading into the distance and then the far-off buzz of the elevator. Then he breathed easier.

He looked around the office. Of course there was no one here. The secretaries had gone home at ten minutes to five and the cleaning woman wouldn't be in until nine. The office in the tower of the Universal Building was like a big, silent, tomb.

And yet, as he trained his ear to the silence, he picked out the cars and people and thousands of moving objects that blended into the steady droning of New York. Across the room the polished walnut paneling and glistening chrome lamp fixtures reflected the impersonal light of a huge neon sign, twenty stories below on Broadway.

He was alone.

He opened the drawer of his desk and for a moment hoped that the thing would be gone. It was still there. It was only a handkerchief, but even in the dim light he could see the edges thickly encrusted with blood.

This morning he had found the handkerchief in his closet at home. How had it gotten there? Who had left it? When? Why? He had been forced to sneak the handkerchief out of the house rather than risk an explanation to June.

HE NEVER would have gone to such lengths to hide a handkerchief had it not been for the other things. These last few days a dozen minor incidents had made him suspect that someone was planning to frame him. It was driving him frantic to watch minor incidents pile up, knowing that they might be part of an insidious plan.

Being a lawyer, he could appreciate the subtlety of it. A bloody handkerchief alone wasn't enough to prove anything. And yet, in like manner, a collection of small insignificant items was the evidence that was sending his last client to the electric chair.

There had been the strange wallet he had found hidden in a remote corner of his cellar. There were a number of suspicious phone calls going through his office switchboard. A voice he had never heard before had warned him of the past, reminded him of years ago when his partner Sam, a young lawyer just out of law school, had bribed a witness to win a spectacular case.

Sam had almost been disbarred for that. Then, suddenly, the witness Sam had bribed disappeared and the case against Sam was dropped. Bill hated that part of the past and he had tried to help Sam live it down. He and Sam had built up a reputable law practice and were respected in the profession.

Why should anyone want to bring up the past now? Perhaps for blackmail. If the witness should reappear,

it would ruin not only Sam's career but would wreck the reputation the firm had built up through the years. That would hit Bill almost as hard.

But the pattern of it didn't smack of blackmail. There was something else . . . something . . . The nerve-racking thing was that he didn't know what would turn up next.

He thought about his last client, Warner Bentley, a fat little ex-racketeer, ex-bootlegger, bar owner, who had stabbed a man in a fight over a woman. Bentley bitterly resented that this time the evidence was undisputedly against him. And he was blaming his lawyer for his conviction.

Bill had always been uneasy about the Bentley case. The little racketeer had many friends who wouldn't like to see him go to the chair or even to prison.

Bill picked the handkerchief out of his desk drawer with thumb and forefinger and dropped it into a newspaper. He quickly wrapped the paper and put it into his briefcase. At home he would burn the whole mess. At least that would be one piece of evidence out of the way.

WHEN Bill came home June was waiting for him in the kitchen. Just seeing her made him feel warmer and more at ease. It gave him a pleasing sense of security. In a world where a guy could be successful and married to a girl like June, nothing could really go wrong. Perhaps the things that had upset him lived only in his imagination.

"You're late, Bill," June said.

"I had a lot of work at the office." He came up behind her and kissed her on the back of the neck.

She wriggled away from him. "Let me get the dinner ready, Bill."

He looked over her shoulder at what she was preparing. He snatched a piece of celery and nibbled on it.

"You'll spoil your appetite."

"Naw . . ."

"Say, Bill," June said, "I got the

funniest kind of phone call this morning."

"Phone call?"

"Yes. I lifted the receiver and a man answered by saying, 'I'm back.'"

"Is that all?" Bill said.

"Then he asked me if you were home and if your partner was still in the market for good witnesses."

Bill could feel himself tense. He remembered the incident many years ago. A witness bribed . . . the disbarment proceedings . . . the disappearance of the witness.

He stared at his wife. "Did the man say anything else?"

"He said you'd hear from him, and then he hung up," June said. "What is it, Bill? Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing, dear. Please don't worry about it."

"But I want to know, Bill," she said. "Please . . ."

He gently turned her around and took her face in his hands. He looked at her hard, wanting to know every line on her face, wanting to feel the memory of it in him.

"I didn't want to upset you," he said.

"Tell me."

"It's nothing concrete, really," he said. "I think someone is trying to frame me—for something."

"Who, Bill? Why?"

"I don't know who, and I don't know why," he said. "I'm sure I have enemies. A criminal lawyer is bound to have. And you know that there are a few things in the past that could ruin the reputation of the firm."

"Blackmail?" she asked him.

"I don't think they'd approach me for blackmail. It was Sam who was involved in the witness bribery, and Sam didn't mention anything."

"Then what do you think they're after?"

"The frameup sounds more like murder," Bill said.

"And you have no idea who's behind it?" June asked.

"Perhaps someone called Warner

Bentley . . . or his friends . . . perhaps.

"What'll you do about it?" she said.

"Go to the police," Bill replied.

"Can't do any harm if they know."

June stepped close to Bill. She put her arms around his neck and pulled him close. "Tomorrow," she said. "Now you're hungry and tired. I'm sure the whole thing won't look half as grim to you tomorrow."

IT WAS with some apprehension that Bill Chandler walked into the Riverdale Precinct Police station the next morning. After letting him wait for half an hour, the captain opened the door of his office, stuck his head out, and called, "Okay, young feller, what's on your mind?"

Bill stepped into the man's office. The captain was a big man with a big smile. His face was rough and weatherbeaten, and he talked with a slow, leisurely drawl.

"You think someone's trying to pin something on you, eh, son?" he said after hearing Bill's story. "Sure it's not just a case of nerves?"

"I'm certain it isn't, captain," Bill said.

"Just the same, it might be best if you and the missus took a vacation." He smiled and added, "Then whoever was trying to frame you wouldn't know where you are."

"You don't believe me either, do you?" Bill said.

"Sure, I believe you," the captain said. "Point is, what are we going to do about it?" His large, coarse hands dwarfed a pencil as he toyed with it. "You see, I've got all kinds of problems," he went on. "If I put a man on the case the newspapers might call it, 'Cop puts detective to guard handkerchief.'"

"And if something happened?"

"Then the newspapers would run it, 'Cop fails to give citizen protection.'"

"You've got problems," Bill said.

"I've got problems, son." Then he smiled again and added, "You're a lawyer, you ought to know that now-

adays hardly anybody ever gets hung for a murder they didn't commit."

"That certainly is reassuring," Bill said.

"Keep in touch with me anyway. If anything happens—well, son, I'll be around."

And nothing did happen, until the night of the next day. It was about eight in the evening when the doorbell of Bill Chandler's house rang and Bill went to answer it. When he opened the door he found a small package lying there. It was an inconspicuous bundle, wrapped in brown paper. But even as Bill looked at it lying there, he had the overwhelming feeling of danger.

He picked the package up and carried it into the living room. There was no name on it, no address.

He hesitated for a moment. Then he slipped off the string, unwrapped the paper, and lifted the lid of the shoe box inside.

It was a gun. He couldn't take his eyes off the gleaming, blued precision instrument lying before him. He recognized it as an S&W revolver, a .38 with stubby barrel. And as he stared down he could feel perspiration breaking out on his body.

THIS was the weapon. He knew that this gun was the instrument with which he was supposed to have committed the unknown crime he was being framed for. That meant that the payoff was here.

He could feel the fingers of fear prodding his stomach. He had to do something. He had to establish an alibi. Alibi for what? For when? Without knowing what it was about, he frantically tried to think of what his best move would be.

He went out into the hall, lifted the telephone receiver, and called Sam's number. He waited for ten rings. No answer.

Perhaps he should go back to the police station. But now it was night and the captain would not be there.

He hated to repeat the story to another policeman.

And while he tried to decide on his next move, he suddenly heard the scream. It was a short, piercing scream that came from the basement of the house. He felt it jarring him, ripping into his mind, chilling him even in the warm house. It was June, his wife.

He raced across the living room, through the hall and down the basement stairs two at a time.

June stood in the center of the room looking down at the floor. And at her feet, on the hard concrete basement floor was the body of a man. The man was on his back, his eyes fixed in the glassy cold stare of a corpse. Bill recognized him as the witness Sam had bribed years ago.

Bill was at June's side. He put his arm around her and turned her away. He could feel her body trembling to his touch.

He led her up the stairs and into the living room.

"It's horrible," she sobbed.

He took her to the couch and sat down next to her. "Take it easy, darling," he told her. And then he said over and over, gently stroking her hair, "Easy, easy."

But while he tried to soothe her, his own mind raced ahead. He could feel the panic mounting in him and he tried to suppress it with all his will.

"You must get rid of it," she said.

"Yes."

"Don't call the police, just get rid of it," she said hysterically.

"I must get rid of the gun too. I won't give them a chance to frame me," Bill said.

He couldn't think of anything else. His mind could focus only on escape. He would get rid of the body somewhere outside the city limits and throw the gun into the Hudson. Without that evidence they could never even get an indictment.

"Wait for me here," he said to his wife. "Whatever happens, wait until I get back."

He rushed down into the cellar and stopped abruptly at the sight of the body. Only now did he notice that the dead man had been shot and that there were two neat, round bullet holes in the front of his coat.

There was something repulsive about the staring corpse. His clothes were shabby and a two days' growth of beard with the staring eyes gave him a ghostly expression. Bill had often seen corpses in the course of his work. But now he felt that he would never be able to touch the man on the floor.

HE FORCED himself to step forward. He bent down and touched the body. Rigor mortis had set in and the body was stiff. With one strong effort he lifted it and started up the back stairs. The man was big and he could hear him bumping against the side of the staircase.

Bill reached the top and carefully opened the back door of the house. He looked out into the night. The neighborhood was quiet and no one was in sight. Somewhere in the distance he heard the howling of a dog. He carried the body the few steps to the garage and propped it against the car while he opened the rear door. He put the body on the floor of the rear seat and covered it with a blanket.

He thought about June. For a moment he wanted to go back and comfort her. He could picture her frenzied frightened form huddled in the living room. But he had to go on. He opened the overhead garage door, started the motor and backed the car into the street. He didn't bother to close the garage door behind him.

Once out on the street he stepped on the gas and the car raced ahead. He tried to decide where to dispose of the body. He could take the Saw Mill River Parkway a few miles upstate. It would be easy to find a lonely spot somewhere above Yonkers.

He made a left turn and stopped for a red light at a main thoroughfare.

And suddenly he stopped breathing. There was a man standing beside his car. Bill could feel his heart pounding in his throat and his hand on the wheel slippery with perspiration. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that the man was a local police officer.

"Keeping things in the dark, eh, buddy?" the cop said.

Bill didn't answer. He didn't trust himself to speak.

"Well, how about it? Are you gonna turn your lights on or do you want a personal invite to the traffic court?"

Bill reached for the light switch with trembling hands. He clicked it and saw the ribbon of light dart into the night.

"And don't use your brights going through town," the policeman said.

"Yes, sir."

Bill started up slowly. He turned the first corner. And then he breathed easier. If only he could reach the highway without another incident. He thought that the excitement would burst inside him.

The stretch of road was lonely and a slight drizzle was beginning to fall. He started the wipers and stared at the concrete ahead. He drove like an automaton, taking the turns to the parkway by instinct.

And then, suddenly, like the snap of a switch, he was sharply conscious of what he was doing. It jolted his whole body. Like a man waking from a dream, he reflected on everything that had happened since he had found June standing beside the body of the dead man.

Was it really he who was driving along a lonely road, trying to dispose of a corpse? It was impossible. How could he have been driven to such an insane thing?

He was a lawyer. All his years of training, his whole life and background should have told him that he was only incriminating himself.

If the policeman at the crossing had discovered the body it would have been as good in court as a confession.

What a beautiful web the D.A. would weave around him! The D.A., who certainly didn't have much love lost for a successful criminal lawyer. The D.A. would picture him as a cheap shyster, a witness briber who had finally stooped to murder to cover the tracks of a filthy past. He could almost hear the district attorney slinging oratory until the members of the jury felt like King Arthur on a white charger.

THE pieces of the puzzle were now in place. His enemy, whoever he was, had woven a neat web around him. As motive, he had planted the camouflage of the old witness bribery. Although Sam had done the actual bribing, Bill had a lot at stake too. It wouldn't do his reputation much good to have his partner disbarred.

Everything seemed to have been planned by a master calculator. Here was the dead body of the person who had been bribed. Then there was the gun and the little fringes of evidence to garnish the pattern.

The one piece missing from the pretty puzzle was the name of his enemy. And he'd never find that out by running away.

He had no choice. He had to go back.

As he turned the car around, a great surge of relief swept over him. He was doing the right thing, he was confident of it. He wanted to see June, to touch her face again and feel her breath on his cheek. He'd been away from the house for half an hour and he knew that she must be terribly frightened alone.

He retraced the route he had taken a few minutes ago. When he stopped for the traffic light, the cop was nowhere in sight. He sped along the deserted streets toward his home.

He still couldn't understand his stupidity in removing the body from the cellar. He blamed his own excitement. And June, in her fear, had urged him on. She never should have suggested it. He should have known better. . . .

He hoped that it wasn't too late to undo the mistake.

As he thought about this, his house came into view at the end of the street. In a minute he would see her.

But he would also have to touch the body of the corpse again, carry it into the house, down the cellar stairs. And then he would have to call the police and answer their prying questions. Try to get out from under this beautiful frame. But there was no other way out.

He was up to the house now. He pulled into the driveway and into the garage. He got out of the car and quickly walked toward the back door of the house.

And then, instead of going in, he went to the open window. He never knew what made him go to the window. Perhaps, in the subconscious of his trained mind, was the tiny dot of suspicion. Perhaps that infinitesimal shadow of doubt for an instant overcame his love for June. Or perhaps it was only an accident that he looked into the window.

WHEN he saw them in each other's arms the feeling hit him in the pit of his stomach. It was a deep pain, and he felt like crying out. Perhaps there was some other explanation.

Sam and June, Sam and June, Sam and June. The words turned over in his mind, gathering speed. His friend and his wife.

He moved closer to the window to hear what they were saying.

"Suppose he came back now. Suppose he should find us here?" It was June, her voice high-pitched and excited.

"Simple. You called me and I came over," Sam said.

"Where do you think he is now?" she asked.

"I bet every radio patrol car for fifteen miles around has been notified," Sam said.

"You gave them a description of the car, didn't you?"

"Of course. They'll pick him up at the first toll gate on the parkway," Sam said. "With the evidence I planted, with the corpse in his car and my testimony, he might even get the chair."

"You without a partner and me without a husband."

"Right, baby."

"I only wish you didn't have to resort to murder."

"I had no choice, baby," Sam said. "The man I killed had actually been blackmailing me. He knew he had me over a barrel for the bribery deal I pulled years ago. Of course I didn't tell Bill about this. The fewer people that knew about me getting blackmailed, the better. So I got the bright idea to kill two birds with one stone: Get rid of the blackmailer and get rid of Bill in the bargain. It bothered me, Bill's knowing about it. Who knows when he might want to use it on me? And the frameup will stick as Bill had almost as much to gain by the man's death as I."

He pulled June close to him again. Bill watched them kiss. He turned away. When he had first glanced into the window, he'd wanted to kill Sam and his wife. Now he had a plan.

He went back to the car and lifted the body out of the back seat. The weight of the dead man seemed to have increased as he strained under the hard form of the unwieldy burden.

Quietly he opened the back door of the house and made his way down the basement stairs. He stopped as the body again struck against the side of the stairs. He held his breath, wondering if they'd heard him.

Somewhere out of the depth of the house came the laughter of two people. He made his way down the rest of the stairs and deposited the body where he had found it. He placed the gun beside it.

For a moment he felt ill. He saw the darkened cellar spinning before his eyes. He braced himself against the wall and gulped in huge

breaths of the cool night air coming through the basement window.

Then he regained his composure. He went upstairs and out into the night. He didn't bother to go near them again. He didn't want to see any more, hear any more. He felt sick.

He pulled up before the police station and hesitated before going in. Perhaps they wouldn't believe him. With the body in the cellar of his own house, they might arrest him anyway. But the case would be less airtight than if they had found him with the body in the car.

But now he couldn't concentrate on the legal aspects. Finding his wife with Sam had taken all the initiative out of him. He only wanted to get the whole nightmare over with. He didn't care how it ended.

HE WAS surprised when the sergeant told him that the captain was in. "If you're William Chandler, then you're the man he's in the office for," the sergeant said.

The captain smiled at Bill as he entered the office. Even in his despair it somehow made Bill feel better.

"I—I want to make a statement," Bill said.

"You're welcome to it," the captain said. "Funny that you should come in here while we were out looking for you."

"I can't run away any more," Bill said. "I told you something was going to happen. . . . I'm tired."

There was a calm and patience in the captain's voice that made Bill feel more at ease.

"You know, son, it's a shame you lawyer fellows don't have more faith in us hard-working, underpaid civil servants. I had a man watching your house ever since you came in here."

Bill sat up in his chair, looking at the captain. Tired though his mind was, it was already working out the details of the case.

"Here's tonight's report," the captain said, pulling a piece of paper out

of his desk drawer. He handed it to Bill.

It was a regular police report form, headed with the date of the investigation and the name of the detective. Bill read it to himself.

Four P.M.: Sam Derringer and unidentified man enter back of house.

Five thirty P.M.: Sam Derringer leaves house alone.

Six forty-five P.M.: Bill Chandler enters front of house.

Eight P.M.: Package placed on doorstep by Sam Derringer.

Eight thirty P.M.: Car with unidentified person leaves driveway. (Too dark for identification)

Eight thirty-two P.M.: Sam Derringer enters front of house from car parked down the street.

"That was the last entry and it was phoned in a short time ago," the captain said. "You can see that we've been keeping a pretty good eye on you. We know your whereabouts and the whereabouts of your partner Sam Derringer. We even know that your partner is in your house right now."

"But why didn't you tell me you

were having my house watched?" Bill asked.

"First of all, because I didn't know if you were on the level," the captain said, and winked at him. "If you weren't a lawyer, I probably would have thought you were a crank in the first place. But then I considered the fact that you had a lot of experience with criminal cases and . . . well, I sort of played the hunch on my own."

At last he was free, Bill thought. The evidence of the police report would check with his own story.

And he had a strange feeling that this was a new start, a clean start that had finally wiped out the mistakes he had made long ago. He was young and there were many people in the world he would still meet and at last he was free. Perhaps, in time, he would get over June too.

"Come on, son," the big man opposite him said. "Things can't be as bad as all that. There's always another day. Now, there was something you wanted to tell me, wasn't there?"

Bill looked at him. "Yes, there is, captain," he said. "Here's the story."

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JULY
ISSUE



AT ALL
NEWSSTANDS

Sucker Take All

By Jules France

Harry was a hustler, a tout — a brain guy who could spot a sucker a mile away. The “mark” he fingered at this track, though, he should have examined first with a microscope.



sembling a well-fed corporation vice president while being, in fact, a racetrack tout.

It's a job that keeps a man hustling; and living by my wits, as I do, I have often toyed with the idea of finding a more intelligent assistant than Winky Taylor. Winky's stutter and nervous eye tic disturbed me much less than his acute mental indigestion, when fed any idea more subtle than picking a pocket.

Now, as we stood on the top tier of the grandstand at Belmont Park, I had grave misgivings as I briefed him once again.

"You're sure you understand?" I insisted.

"S-sure, Harry," he blinked. "B-but I still can't fi-figure out why we don't scram like always when he sh-shells out for a b-bet the first time."

I ran my fingers through the patch of silver gray over my right temple. "Because," I said patiently, "a sucker is worth much more once you win his confidence. Confidence—you know what that is, don't you, Winky?"

"S-sure," he nodded. "Like a c-confidence man. B-but what I can't fi-fig-

SOME are born to be plucked, as Barnum suggested. Others, like myself, seem to have been destined by the divine order of things to do the plucking. I make no apologies for re-

ure out is, suppose we d-don't pick a winner for him the fi-first time. Then what?"

"Then we will merely have lost his money and a little of our time. I'll simply move to another part of the grandstand and we'll try it again. Now do you understand?"

"K-kind of deep, ain't it, Harry?" Winky said in awe.

You don't spend as much time as I do at the tracks without getting to recognize the easy marks. The man I had my eyes on stood out like a plum in a bowl of pistachio nuts. A fat, gullible face, greedy little eyes, an expensive and gaudy large cream hat. The kind of character who made a killing on the black market during the war and has most of it in a bank vault, in cash.

Getting him primed was painfully easy. He even began the conversation himself, almost as soon as I sat down next to him.

"Fine day for the horses," he nodded. "Does a man good to take a day off from the grind and relax at the races."

This, I reflected ironically, was just about asking for it.

"Not in my case," I sighed. "It's part of my grind."

"Really?" He looked suddenly interested. "You connected with the track or something?"

"In a way," I admitted. "I'm a jockey's agent. Two of my boys riding today—Glade and Everett."

"You don't say?" He couldn't have



been more impressed if I had told him my name was Eisenhower. Before I realized it, he had a fleshy hand extended under my nose. "My name's Pinton—Paul Pinton. Engraving's my line, but my heart belongs to the ponies."

He was calling me Harry by the time the nags moved out for the first race. I knew all about his wife Emma, his two kids, his new convertible and the football record of his alma mater. He'd also confided that he made a lot of money in his business, and that a heavy lump of it went the way of all horseflesh.

Finally, as the first entries lined at the barrier, he cleared his throat with an embarrassed smile and asked apologetically, "Wouldn't happen to know any good things today, Harry, would you?"

I shook my head. "I get a few tips now and then," I admitted, "but unless it's a sure thing I keep my money in my pocket. You know what Barnum said."

He sighed and stared down at his card. "Guess that's right. Who do you like in the first, anyhow?"

"Glass Slipper. But I wouldn't risk a nickel on him. I trust horses, but not owners. Unless I know what an owner's up to."

"Glass Slipper, eh? I'd have picked Danny Boy."

We both saved money on that one. A filly named Prancer led the field all the way. Danny Boy finished sixth, and Glass Slipper took place money. Respect gleamed out of the folds of fat encasing Paul Pinton's piggy eyes.

"Say! You weren't too far off, were you?"

"A miss is as good as a mile," I shrugged. "I wouldn't play anything except a sure thing, and then only to win."

Five minutes after the first race, right on schedule, Winky Taylor "located" me like a ferret after a rabbit. "Harry!" he whispered hoarsely. "I j-just got a straight tip from

J-Jack Felton! It's all s-set in the next f-for . . ." Here his voice fell to an indistinct mumble in my ear. I let my eyes dance a little.

"Thanks, Winky," I said and stood up. "Excuse me, Paul."

"Uh, Harry . . ." Pinton's pudgy fingers caught my sleeve. He wet his lips anxiously. "How about letting me in on it, like a good skate, huh? I sure would like a change of luck!"

I glanced dubiously at Winky. "How about it?"

"G-gee," he blinked, "I d-don't think so. J-Jack wouldn't like any outsiders tipped. He can g-get in awful trouble!"

Pinton didn't wait for me to bait the hook. He dug into his pocket and came out with a folded roll of bills thicker than his hammy fist.

"Well, will you ride some for me with yours?" he begged pathetically. "That would be all right, wouldn't it?"

I deliberated a moment. "I guess so, Winky, don't you?"

"I'll s-say!" Winky said jubilantly. "I mean—I g-guess so."

Pinton eagerly peeled off a number of new, crisp banknotes. When he pressed them into my hand, I saw that they were all twenties.

"Eight hundred," he told me, piggy eyes shining. "On the nose!"

On the way toward the windows, Winky was almost apoplectic with excitement. "Gosh! Eight hu-hundred! Harry, don't be c-crazy! Let's g-get out of here now!"

"Winky," I said calmly, "put your brains back between your toes and leave the thinking to me. Did you see the size of that bankroll? I'm not taking peanuts when we can walk off with an elephant. If we pick a winner for him, he'll trust us with the works next time."

"All r-right," Winky sighed, blinking unhappily. "But eight hundred is a l-lot of peanuts."

I walked up to the \$100 window and bought eight tickets on Honey Boy in the second. Honey Boy was the

favorite, quoted at even money only, and he had a fine record. I told Winky to blow, reminding him to find me again with another "tip" right after the fourth.

Returning to the grandstand, I found Pinton waiting for me with the anxiety of an expectant father. "Did you get it on?" he whispered hoarsely. "The whole lot?"

I nodded casually and handed him the eight tickets on No. 5. He hastily consulted his program, then looked up with a knowing, confident grin. "Oh, it's Honey B—"

"Shhhh!" I said sternly. He looked abashed.

They were off in a white heat. It was a fast race, with the jockeys really trying. At first a nag named Melbourne grabbed the rail out in front, a chestnut filly named Roger Doger half a length behind, and Honey Boy at their heels in the third slot. Halfway around the track Roger Doger started to inch up on Melbourne.

Pinton was yelling his throat raw for Honey Boy. I was too tense inside to do anything but clench my fists and hope. I swallowed hard when Roger Doger forged into the lead as they came into the stretch. Eight hundred bucks, as Winky had aptly stated, were a lot of peanuts. Spilled peanuts, if Honey Boy didn't—

I jumped up on the seat and started yelling. Honey Boy's jockey was whipping him into a sudden burst of speed. Melbourne fell back into third position, and Honey Boy slowly drew abreast of the frantically flying Roger Doger. Too slowly, I groaned silently. And suddenly they were across the tape.

It was so close that I had to wait for the decision to go up on the board. And the decision was—Honey Boy.

Pinton just about fell on my neck with kisses.

He came back from the windows beaming with corpulent joy. "Man, what an easy killing! How much did you collect, Harry?"

"Five hundred," I lied. Then I dropped my voice to a sharp whisper. "Listen, Paul, I don't mind letting you ride your money with mine when I've got a sure thing. But next time please remember—don't mention the horse by name before the race!"

He nodded apologetically. "Okay, Harry, I'm sorry. I'll be more careful next time."

I hardly saw the third race. I was too busy estimating the size of Paul Pinton's bankroll. All of it was as good as in my pocket now. And by all of it, that meant none—not even peanuts—for Winky Taylor. This would be as good a time as any for a parting of the ways. I'd carried him on the back of my brains long enough.

Winky showed up promptly a few minutes after the fourth race. Same routine, same cautious whisper in my ear. I cocked an eyebrow at Paul Pinton and nodded slowly. He dug down eagerly and came up with the thick wad of new bills. Counting them rapidly, he handed me the whole roll.

"Six thousand!" he whispered.

I decided to give him something for his money. Leaning over, I whispered in his ear, "You can retire after this one. It's paying four to one at the bookies' right now!"

He almost swooned in ecstasy.

As we went up the steps of the grandstand, Winky could hardly speak. "H-holy smoke!" he gasped. "Six th-thousand!"

"I told you, didn't I?" I said scornfully. "Now listen, Winky, we can't take any chances in case of a squawk. We'll split here, and I'll meet you at the hotel in an hour."

"G-gee, Harry, don't you think we'd b-better stick together? You with all that m-money on you, I m-mean?"

I threw him a sharp glance as we pushed our way through the crowds in the betting ring. "What's the matter, Winky? Don't you trust me, all of a sudden?"

"Oh, n-no, it isn't that, Harry! I mean you m-might get st-stuck up or something. Don't you th-think I better carry some of the dough, j-just in case?"

"No, I don't!" I said in exasperation. "Now go on, Winky, do as you're told! At the hotel in an hour!"

I watched him melt away into the crowds, his eyes blinking in unhappy doubt. Good-by, sucker, I thought ironically.

I halted suddenly at the turnstiles in amazement.

On the other side of the entrance gate, outside the park, I saw a stout man in a large cream hat dash up breathlessly to a taxi, get in and slam the door. The taxi zoomed off. I stood there speechlessly, watching it go. The man had been Paul Pinton.

My brain buzzed like a downstairs doorbell. It didn't make sense. A guy shells out six grand to me to make a killing for him, and instead of waiting for me in the grandstand, he beats it out of the park as though—

As though the cops were on his tail!

An awful suspicion began to dawn upon me. It didn't have time to do more than dawn, because I felt a firm grip on the biceps of my right arm. I wheeled around. The man had a weary, hard face—the face of a Pinkerton plainclothes operative.

"All right, buddy," he said softly. "Come on."

"Now, wait a minute! I haven't done anything!"

"Much," he said dryly. "Just passing eight hundred in counterfeit bills, that's all. We're holding you for the FBI." He turned to another man at his elbow—the cashier from whom I'd bought the tickets on Honey Boy. "Sure that's the guy?"

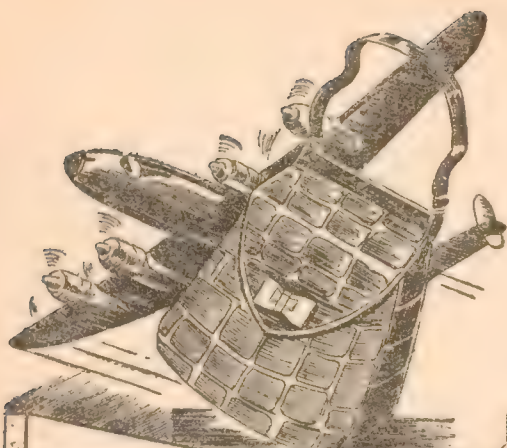
"That's him, all right!"

I thought about the six thousand dollars, all in crisp new twenties, folded in my pocket. Paul Pinton hadn't lied. He'd "made" a lot of money in the engraving line, all right. And by this time he was far and safely away, richer by sixteen hundred genuine iron men, which I'd let him collect with the eight tickets on Honey Boy. Leaving me with a landscape view of an eight-ball.

As they led me away, I thought about Winky, who would undoubtedly scramble for cover when he heard they'd picked me up. He wouldn't care, I reflected bitterly, that I'd go up on a Federal offense—me, the guy who's always looked out for him. Even if they caught up with him, he wouldn't incriminate himself by backing up my story that I was just an innocent tout trying to earn a fast buck.

It's enough to make a man lose his faith in human nature.





I'm No Hero

By George Wm. Rae



For a cop who used his head, it was a cut-and-dried killing. But Sayers was the kind of a dick who'd listen to his head— and then play a homicide hunch.

THE voice on the radio, suave and distant, was like a scalpel, quietly slicing into the tissue of her life.

"... Ferrini had been murdered about a half hour before his partner, Michael Weston, returned to the office and discovered the body. Police

are searching for the murder weapon—a .38 calibre automatic..."

She flicked the switch off and sat straight and unmoving on the divan, staring at the floral drapes which she had cut and sewn and hung. But she wasn't seeing them. She was seeing Lou Ferrini with a hole in his head.

She was seeing herself—running . . . running. . . .

A quiet, firm knock dropped sound into the room. It had an inescapable, immutable quality which said it wouldn't be ignored.

She rose, automatically straightening her dress, and forced herself to walk to the door and open it.

The man standing there was tall, slender, dressed in soft gray. A lick of black hair had dribbled out onto his forehead under the pearl-gray hat. He looked steadily and calmly at her with brown eyes that were set deeply and surrounded by little wrinkles of disillusion and wisdom.

"Miss Martin?" he asked softly. "I'm Sayers, of the Homicide Bureau."

She looked him over with the large eyes of a child. So this was the law—a tall, soft-spoken young guy with tired eyes and bent shoulders.

"Please come in," she said, and stepped aside.

Sayers removed his hat and stepped into the apartment.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked mechanically, her lips stiff with fear.

SAYERS shook his head. His eyes were flitting about the room. *Like little brown hunting dogs*, she thought, *doing what they've been trained to do, seeking the trail of a murderer.*

The eyes came back to her after a moment.

"Lieutenant Kingston sent me over to pick you up," Sayers said, then added easily, "just for questioning. Routine. Since you were Ferrini's secretary, he figures you could fill in the background that Michael Weston, the partner, gave us."

His eyes wandered again, then came back. "How did a kid like you ever get a job with a cheap hood like Lou Ferrini?" He asked it casually, even disinterestedly, as if he didn't really care whether she answered or not.

"It was a job," she said, as evenly

as she could. "It paid good money, and I didn't do anything dishonest."

Sayers shrugged.

It's nothing to him, she thought; *he sees killers every day, people in messes, lives all snarled up in knots.*

"Were you at the office today?"

Sayers asked.

She hesitated only a fraction of a second. Sayers didn't seem to notice. "No," she said. "This is Saturday, my day off."

"I suppose you got it all on the radio," he said. "Your boss, Ferrini, was murdered this morning. Weston found him when he returned from a business trip to Chicago. Other office tenants said they heard a quarrel taking place earlier and a couple of them recall hearing what they thought was a car backfiring. That was the shot, of course. Just one. In the back of the head. The boss just wants to go over some details with you, Miss Martin. Nothing to get upset about."

She wondered why he had told her all that and watched him solemnly study the room again. His eyes drifted over the neat, budget-priced furniture, the flowered divan cover, the hand-painted lampshades—all her intimate little personal creations, into which she had built a part of herself. It was crude, painful—this man's probing into the things of her life, unfeeling, uncaring, routine.

Then she saw his eyes settle on her handbag. Her whole body tightened. It was as if his eyes were looking right through the leather at what was in that bag.

HE WALKED over to the little table on which the handbag rested and stood there looking down at it for what seemed a long time; then he reached out and lifted it.

His head swiveled. "Money? Marbles? Lead sinkers?" he asked softly.

She stared at him, unable to answer.

"Pretty heavy," he said. "You don't carry a rod, do you, miss?"

He opened the handbag and, looking in, took out his handkerchief and reached into the bag.

He looked at the gun. "Thirty-eight," he said quietly. He sniffed it. "Fired today." His eyes came up to hers. "Your gun?" he asked.

She couldn't answer. The words wouldn't come out.

He came over and stood looking down at her. His voice hardened perceptibly, "Is this your gun, Miss Martin?"

She shook her head.

"Whose gun is it?"

She shook her head again.

For a long time Sayers stood there holding her gaze. The seconds ticked away. City sounds dropped into the room, muted, impersonal, callously ordinary and indifferent.

Finally Sayers shrugged again and said, "Okay, kid, if that's the way it's going to be." He chopped it off there, let it hang for a moment while he expelled a breath, then on the inhalation he said, "Let's go downtown."

Downtown was a big building with many flights of worn stairs and many pairs of disillusioned eyes and miles of varnished surfaces and innumerable unexplained thunders and smells.

Many mouths spoke to her in tones ranging from fatherly condescension to bestial snarling, then she was turned over to a matron and taken through corridors that smelled of creolin and cigar smoke to a cell block where she was placed in a cell and ignored.

She sat quietly and wondered if she would stay here forever, deserted by all humanity, shelved, forgotten. She also felt a warm exultation. She hadn't told them a thing. Not a thing. . . .

NOTHING. Not a thing," Lieutenant Kingston said bitterly around his cigar. "Maybe after she cools off alone for a few hours she'll loosen up."

Leaning against the wall, coils of

cigarette smoke writhing over the solemn planes of his face, Sergeant Michael Sayers wondered if the lieutenant was right. The procedure he was using with the Martin girl was routine. Mike Sayers had often wondered about routine procedure.

Police work is ninety-nine per cent boring routine, the saying goes, and one per cent sheer heroism. Sayers, a gentle cynic, had rephrased it: Police work is ninety-nine per cent sheer routine and one percent boring heroism. The trick is to know when heroism is required.

They had this girl, Nora Martin, cut, dried and harvested. Sure, they wanted a confession, but they didn't need it. She'd been spotted leaving the office building shortly after the murder. She had possessed the murder gun.

The motive was fairly strong. Someone had been blackmailing Lou Ferrini — big bank withdrawals proved that—and it wouldn't be hard for a secretary to get blackmail data on her boss. Routine checks would bring the stuff up. Even if they found nothing, they could show a strong probability.

Maybe, Sayers thought, I should never have become a dick. In spite of all the evidence against her, he still had the feeling they were wrong.

But if they were wrong, why didn't she tell them they were wrong instead of just evading their questions or saying nothing at all? That wasn't hard to figure—she must be protecting somebody. It wasn't a relative; they'd checked and found she had no family beyond a quiet farm couple, her mother and father, out in the Middle West. No boy friend, either.

Sayers shoved his hat back on his dark hair and rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. Then he quietly left the room.

It was six o'clock. The case was pretty well wrapped. In the Squad Room, putting on his topcoat, Sayers was thinking of a beer and a little warmth and friendship. His feet hurt.

He was feeling a strange new loneliness that he couldn't understand.

Maybe he shouldn't have been a cop. There were sound physiological reasons for it in addition to the obvious psychological ones. He was too tall to shadow anyone and he had a tall man's trouble with his feet. On top of that, he was always stumbling into the role of friend of the oppressed—and what suspect, cornered by the Law, can not make a good case for himself as a victim of oppression?

Sayers walked out of Headquarters and down the stairs between the blue lights. It was a misty night, halting the street lights and making shadowy phantoms out of the pedestrians.

He walked, hunting a bar; he wanted one of the quiet, old-style bars sans television, sans juke box and above all sans women.

He found one on a side street, a little narrow room, dimly lighted and almost deserted. He went in and hung over a beer, thinking of how tired he was and how lonely a single man of thirty-two can get in thirty-two years. He also thought of a neat apartment with hand-made stuff in it, the personality of a woman in it, of a life being lived.

Lieutenant Kingston would have laughed. Sayers was basing his whole argument that Nora Martin was innocent on one short look at a room, a few words with her—an impression, a hunch, nothing else.

Sayers put down the beer. It tasted rancid. He walked out of the bar, slamming the door behind him, strode past the steamy windows and down the street.

A CAB slewed over to his raised arm and he was in it, giving Nora Martin's address. This was not going to be strictly routine; Mike Sayers was betting his life as a cop on what he was doing and he knew it. But, he sighed, maybe he should never have been a cop in the first place.

The super opened the door for him,

then backed out, leaving Sayers to prowl the room alone. No search warrant. Against regulations. He was already liable for suspension if Kingston found out.

The place had already been searched, of course. By Kingston himself. But there was always a chance that something might have been missed.

Sayers tried the less obvious places where a snapshot or a letter might have been tucked—behind the mirror on the dresser, between the pages of books, and even the high shelves of the clean little pantry. He found nothing, not even the usual dust.

A couple of the books were interesting. One was called, *The Science of Penology*, another was Lawes' *Twenty Thousand Years in Sing Sing*.

Interesting—to a criminologist or a prison warden or a sensationalist. Nora Martin hadn't looked like any of those. She'd just looked like what she was, a secretary and a straight-thinking kid.

Sayers sighed again and said maybe he should never and so forth.

There was nothing in the apartment. He put out the lights and went out, locking the door behind him.

He brought the key back to the super's apartment.

"Thanks," Sayers told him, "for the use of the hall."

The super was a little round man with big blue eyes. "What about the kid, Miss Martin?" he asked. "She in a bad jam?"

Sayers studied the super and decided to take a chance. He knew that Lieutenant Kingston, as a routine procedure, never told anybody anything, just asked questions and let it go at that.

"The kid's in a real bad jam," Sayers said softly. "They're hanging a murder rap on her."

Thin eyelids descended a couple of times over the super's round blue eyes. "A murder rap!" he said. "On that kid! They're crazy!"

"Sure they are," Sayers said. "I agree. That's why I'm working after I'm off duty. I'm trying to help her."

The super looked at him suspiciously. "Why?" he asked. It was a nice simple question which required a nice simple answer, so Sayers thought of the best one he knew.

"I'm in love with her," he said.

The super smiled, "Oh," he chuckled, "do cops fall in love?" Then he sobered. "That big, fat mugg—what's his name? Lieutenant Something, I guess. He asked a lot of questions, tough-like. Go to hell, you So-and-so, I said to myself, and told him a lot of lies, innocent-like."

The super turned back into the apartment, scabbled around on a littered rolltop desk, found a pencil and paper. Laboriously, he wrote out a name and address.

"This guy is a friend of hers," he said. "Maybe he could help you."

Sayers folded the piece of paper and put it into his pocket. He shook hands solemnly with the super and left.

THE house was in a run-down section of the city. It had once been a mansion, a town house, but now it was sliced up into apartments, little ones, and its hallways were smelly and noisy.

Sayers dug the landlord out of a first-floor apartment and asked for an apartment number. Then he climbed two flights of stairs, found a door and knocked.

The woman who answered was obviously in that state known as gloriously drunk, under the weather, or stinking. Sayers brushed her aside casually and strode into the studio apartment.

The place was draped with cigarette smoke and purified by alcohol fumes. Around the big room were several peculiar works of art which resembled sunsets or fried eggs smeared with ketchup, seen through the eyes of a coke addict. Disposed on a leather divan was a character in

dirty slacks and turtleneck sweater. Male sex. In his twenties. Handsome, in a soft, spongy way.

"Raoul Leede?" Sayers asked him.

The character nodded indolently and drew a long puff on a cigarette which was separated from his precious lips by five inches of chrome-plated cigarette holder.

Sayers grunted and turned to the blonde. "Your sister, of course," he said. Then, abruptly: "Get her to hell out of here. I want to talk to you about Nora Martin."

The character lost his slouch, sat up quickly, "Beat it, baby," he said to the blonde. She weaved into another room and slammed the door.

"What about Nora Martin?" Raoul Leede asked.

"What's your relationship to her?"

"What's it to you?"

Sayers' badge flashed.

"Oh," Leede said, "that's different. Nice kid, Nora. I took her out a few times. Just friends."

"She's down at Headquarters, facing a murder rap," Sayers told him.

Leede's eyebrows lifted slightly, "Really?" he said. "Tough luck. But why come to me?"

"I heard you . . . saw a lot of her."

Leede shook his head, leaned back on the divan. "Tough luck. Hope she makes out." He turned his head, yelled, "Hey, Cynthia!" The blonde staggered out. "I paint her every morning." Leede smiled. "Abstractions, non-representative paintings, of course. This morning she brought a couple of friends, early." Leede drew on his cigarette. "When did this murder Nora's mixed up in take place?" he asked and smiled again.

Sayers blew some of the bad air out of his lungs.

"Go to hell," he said, and walked out.

Outside, Sayers stood in the mist, breathing deeply of the moist air. The night crowded close around him and the tired old houses crouched along the street, noisy and uncouth, like gossiping hags.

Hands in pockets, Mike Sayers walked rapidly away, his hard heels cracking on the concrete, his big body slouched and tired.

SOMEWHERE a door clanged and footsteps clopped down the steel corridor. Nora Martin turned her head in the direction of the sound. At last, she thought, *someone has remembered that I'm here.*

He stopped in front of her cell and stood looking through the bars at her. That same tall detective called Sayers. His brown eyes looked tired and his shoulders had more of a slouch than ever, but he still gave her the feeling of an impersonal machine. A detecting machine which quietly took your life apart and scientifically studied it.

"About Raoul Leede," Sayers said casually. "The boy artist—"

She rose and took a step toward the door. "I don't know him," she lied evenly.

Sayers pursed his lips. "Okay," he said, "but I just met the heel. I know him. It's easy to put together. A routine job. Let me tell you about it. He did three to five years back in the Ohio State Penitentiary for embezzlement. I just checked it. You think you're in love with the guy and you came East to help rehabilitate him. That's why you worked for Lou Ferrini—you could make more there than you could as an ordinary secretary. Raoul Leede probably gave you a rod, that .38 automatic, with which to protect yourself.

"Ferrini made a few passes and you told Raoul about it. This morning you went to the office, found Ferrini murdered, and thought Raoul had done it out of jealousy or something. You picked up the rod and beat it. Now you won't talk because you think you'll incriminate Raoul."

She moved a couple of steps backward. How could this gangling, soft-spoken man know all those things? She'd been right, he was a detecting machine.

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"There's nothing amazing about it," Sayers told her, as if reading her mind. "Those books on Penology in your apartment started me thinking along those lines. After I got to Raoul and found out what kind of a heel he was, I was certain. The rest was routine checking and putting two and two together."

She took the two steps back to the door of the cell. "Raoul is not a heel!" she said. "You know everything, but that's one place you're wrong! He made a mistake, tried to get money to study art the wrong way. When he got out, nobody would give him a chance. I had to help him because I love him. I don't care what anybody says about him. He can be a great artist and he deserves a chance to get decent training."

Sayers leaned close. She stared into his dark, clear eyes and at the sweaty planes of his face.

"Forget it, kid," he said bitterly. "I just met your hero. First, he said he didn't know you. Then he admitted he knew you and had already kissed you off. He had a blond dame up there. She was with him at the time of the murder. I don't doubt it, but as a matter of routine I'm going to check. Take the rap for him, if you want to, but he's not worth it."

He spoke with a vehemence that backed her away from him, as if it really meant something to him, as if he cared that each blunt word was like a blow.

"Leede knows you're in a jam," he said, "and what does he do about it? He gets high with a dizzy blonde. This is the guy you're going to bat for!"

Sayers' face looked grim and hard. The little wrinkles around his eyes became sharp, black lines. His wide mouth was slitted and angry.

"You've made a mistake," he said. "Are you going to continue to be a sap? Tell me the truth, the whole story."

MORE footsteps came down the corridor. The matron opened the door of the cell. She said something to Sayers about the papers being brought up, then turned to Nora.

"Get your coat on, kid," she said. "Galahad is thrusting out his neck for you."

Sayers didn't speak. He took her by the arm and led her back through the mazes of corridors and stairways and finally through a door. They were outside and it was raining softly. A car was parked at the curb. Sayers opened the door for her and she got in.

They drove in silence for a few blocks, then Sayers said, "You know you're in a hell of a fix, don't you?"

She looked straight ahead, through the fan that the wiper had made on the windshield. She kept her lips tightly together.

"I know," Sayers went on, "that you did the crazy thing because you thought you were helping somebody you loved. But you're in it now. Up to your ears."

She turned and looked at him. She pushed words past a lump in her throat.

"Last night Mr. Ferrini asked me to work," she said, "and he took me to dinner. There was nothing to it, just a boss and his secretary grabbing a bite, it had happened a couple of times before. But Raoul saw us in the restaurant. He made a scene and Mr. Ferrini had him thrown out. I went to the office this morning to quit the job because I was afraid of what Raoul might do. I found Ferrini dead. I thought that Raoul—oh, I know it's crazy to obstruct the law, but I thought I loved Raoul—and that he had killed Ferrini because of me. I took the gun and ran."

Sayers had stopped the car. She looked around her. They were at the building in which Lou Ferrini had his offices.

She turned to Sayers and asked, "Why did you come here?"

He smiled tiredly. "We'll look it

over once more, kid," he said. "My goose is cooked with the lieutenant, anyway."

They entered the building and rode the elevator to the high office in silence, past floor after floor of dark loneliness, until they were at the eighteenth and walking down a dim-lit hall.

She had a key and she opened the door, flicked on the lights.

They passed through her own little cubbyhole into the more spacious quarters used by Lou Ferrini.

Then they were standing looking at the certain place on the floor where he had been lying a few hours before.

The silence of the deserted building cloaked them. The only sound was the faint keening of the wind outside the windows, the tapping of the rain-fingers on the glass, the distant drone of the city far below.

Sayers was prowling the suite of offices. She followed him.

"This is Mr. Weston's office," she told him as he opened the door.

SAYERS went in and she followed him. He walked over to a green filing cabinet. It was locked, of course. He flipped through a letter tray on top of the desk, read a couple of papers. One fell to the floor.

She stooped automatically and picked it up. It was an airline flight schedule and the Chicago flights were underlined.

She felt her breath catch in her throat.

"Sayers! I think I've got something!"

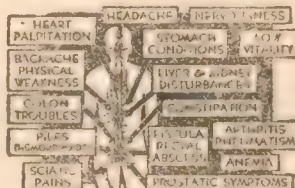
She ticked her high heels into her own office, dug into her desk and came up with a Chicago train schedule.

She was scared and elated by the very obvious deduction she had made. Sayers had followed her into the little room.

"Does this mean anything?" she asked. "I made train reservations for Weston, yet he has a flight schedule with the Chicago planes under-

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lined. Does that mean what I think it means?"

Sayers leaned over the desk. "It looks like an alibi," he said. Then he straightened. "And it looks like a damn good one. The kind that's hard to break down. That's why we didn't go too hard on Weston, because he had the alibi. We knew he had the motive—he'll take over the business."

He stood mulling that over quietly, knowing there was something there—all he had to do was dig it out. After a while he spoke briefly to Nora. She nodded, wide-eyed, then drew the telephone close and dialed a number.

A voice sputtered in her ear.

"Hello, Mr. Weston?" she asked.

"This is Miss Martin. I'm at the office. I wanted to talk to you about my promotion—naturally, I'll expect one, now that I know who killed Mr. Ferrini."

After listening a moment, she hung up.

"He's coming down," she said.

A shudder ran through her. Weston hadn't denied anything. He had just said that he would be down and discuss it with her.

"D'you get the play?" Sayers said.

"I stay under cover while you bait him into talking, then I jump him. Get it?"

She nodded. Her eyes were big on him.

"Wouldn't it be better if we started one of those dictating machines going?" she asked. "Get it all on wax?"

Sayers grinned. "That is an excellent idea. Your routine procedure is smooth, Miss Martin," he said. "Very smooth."

He bent down and kissed her on the lips. She kissed him back and with a little shock suddenly realized that Sayers meant a lot to her, more than she'd bargained for.

They didn't have to wait long for Michael Weston to come. In a short time he sailed through the office door, a sturdy, red-faced man, impeccably dressed. There was an air of great

health and strength about Weston, Ferrini's partner, and a frankly animal cunning in his eyes.

He came immediately to the point. "What's this nonsense you babbled over the phone?" he asked.

"Briefly," she said, hiding her fear, "that you killed Mr. Ferrini."

HE PUT his great hands on the desk and leaned toward her. "I was in Chicago," he said softly. "The police have already checked with the men I did business with there. My train didn't arrive here until after Ferrini was killed."

"You weren't on that train," she said. "You came back last night—by plane. Your intention was probably to kill him last night, you must've been trailing him when he took me to the restaurant. You saw the scene with Raoul and decided to frame him for the murder by doing it here, in the office, with the gun you knew I kept here and which you knew that Raoul had given me. What drove you to kill him, Mr. Weston, just a hunger for his share—or had he refused to pay you any more blackmail?"

Weston's round face hardened slowly as she talked. His face told her that most of her guesses and suppositions were true.

Then he laughed suddenly, but there was no humor in that laugh. "You know," he said, "I think you've come too close to the truth." He paused for a moment, then: "You've figured it out well, Miss Martin. And I'm sorry for you that you did. Yes, I killed him because he wouldn't pay any more blackmail. He probably was planning to kill me. I agree with him, too. A man shouldn't pay blackmail."

A gun flashed in Weston's fat fingers.

"I don't intend to pay any, either," he said quietly, but with venomous emphasis. "I've already killed one man. What's to stop me from killing you?"

Sayers, in the darkness of the in-

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ner office, had taken it all in. So had
the whirring dictaphone machine.
Now Sayers had his gun in his fist.

*It's time for that one per cent of
boring heroism, he told himself. The
ninety-nine per cent of sheer routine
is through.*

He shoved the door open. Weston
whirled, growling in his great round
chest. Sayers fired and the bullet tore
a hunk out of the shoulder of Wes-
ton's coat as the big man ducked with
amazing speed. Weston snapped a
shot, turned, and went out the door
like a huge, wounded bear. Sayers
sprinted out after him.

Weston was staggering down the
long corridor. Sayers aimed careful-
ly at the legs, fired. Weston turned
slowly and sat down, leaning against
the wall. He lifted the gun and emp-
tied it. But the wound in his right
shoulder had ruined his aim. The
slugs dug into walls and ceiling.

Sayers walked down the corridor
and took the gun out of Weston's
hand. The big man's face was sweaty
and his breath was loud and ragged.
Sayers clicked the handcuffs on him
and turned.

Nora Martin was running toward
him. She came out of the smoke haze
and dimness into his arms.

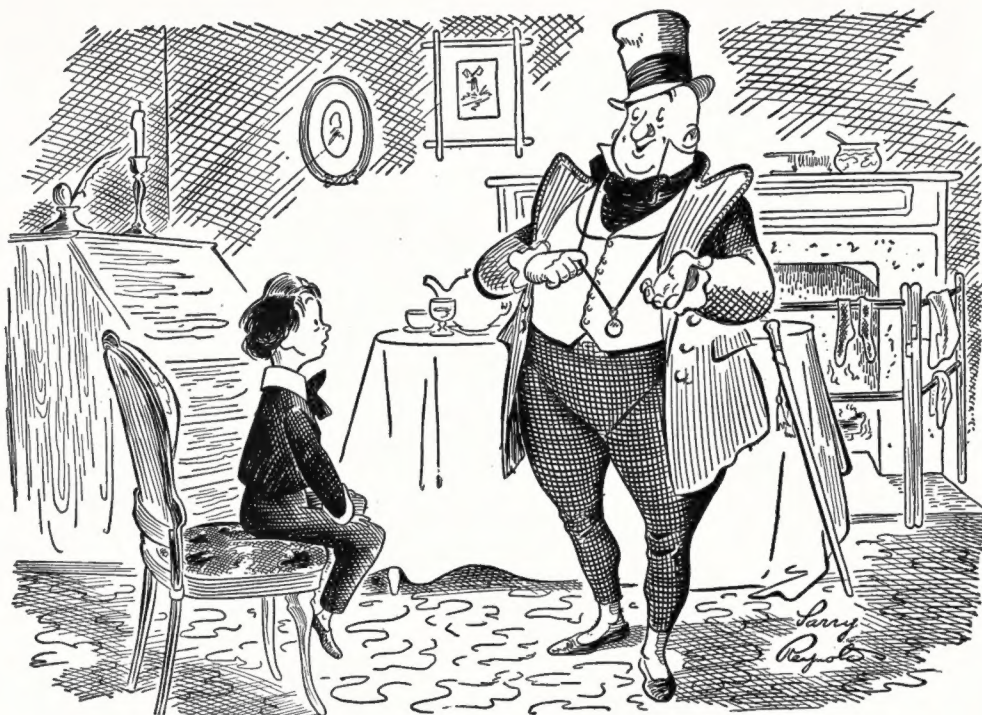
"Sayers!" she gasped. "Are you
all right?"

He smiled down at her, "Sure,
baby," he said. "This was strictly
routine. I guess I've still got a cou-
ple of percentage points to go before
I get to that boring heroism."

"Sayers," she said, "being a cop
will be a dangerous business for a
family man."

Sayers shrugged. "Sheer rou-
tine," he said. "Maybe I could be a
hero to our kids."





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